

UNICORN GENESIS



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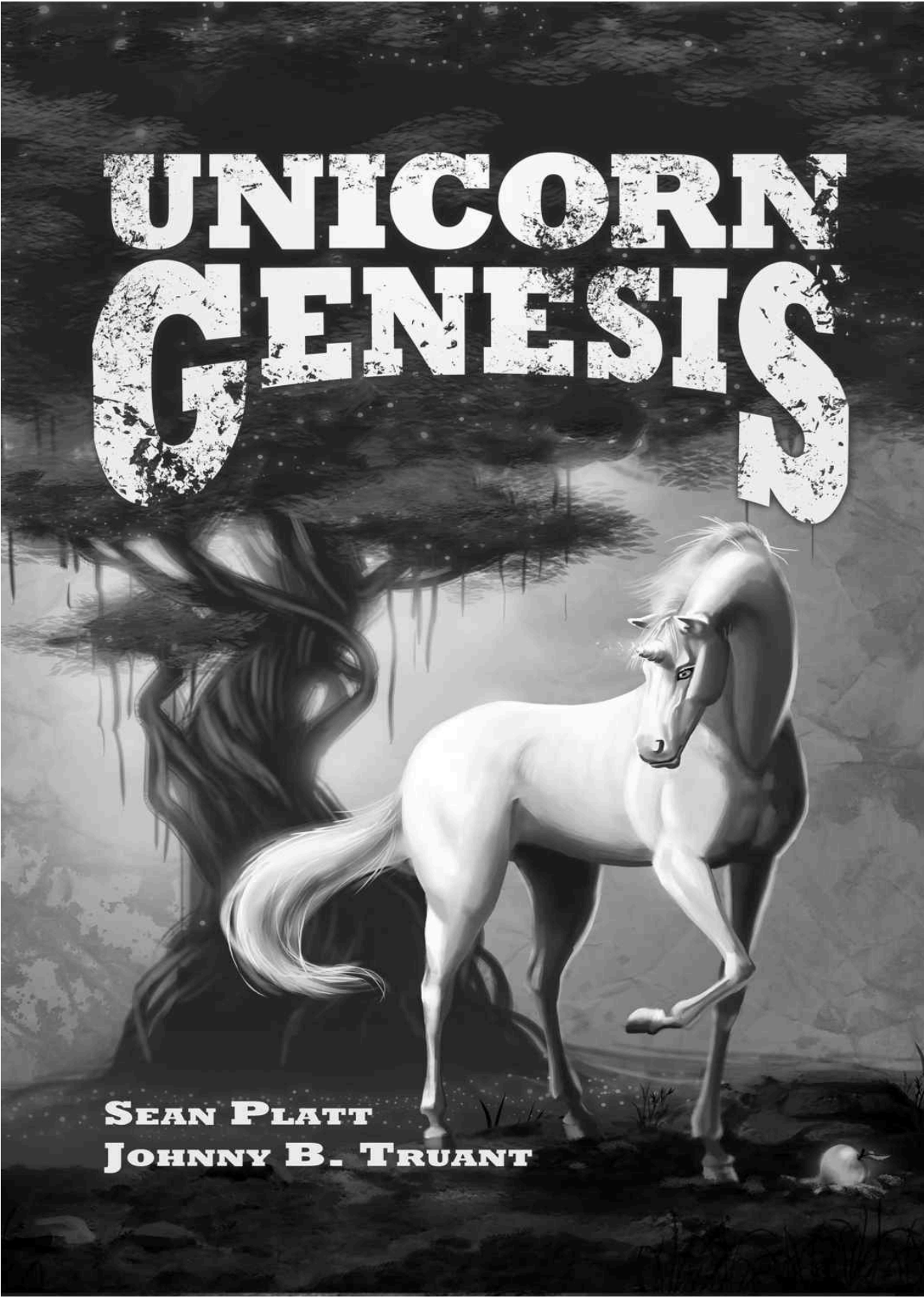
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UNICORN GENESIS



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Unicorn Genesis

**by Sean Platt &
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REALM & SANDS

UNICORN GENESIS

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A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOK

The events in Unicorn Genesis take place before the events in Unicorn Western, but for the best possible reading experience, you'll want to start with Unicorn Western first. You know how there's that other really great series with the prequels that came out later, and if you had seen those first you never would have cared as much about the original trilogy? This is a little like that, except that Unicorn Genesis is way, way more awesome than those other prequels.

You don't need to have read Western to understand Genesis, and reading Genesis won't really spoil anything when reading Western, but reading them in the order our stories were written will give you the best possible reading experience.

In whatever order you read them, enjoy. And thanks for reading.

If you've not yet read Unicorn Western, start by clicking or visiting the following link:

[>> Click Here to Get Unicorn Western<<](#)



CHAPTER 1

IT STARTS IN THE FARBACK

The gunslinger sat on his front porch, looking old and feeling older, as the worlds ended around him.

A moment before, there had been a tremendous splintering crash. Clint had stepped outside to watch the largest remaining section of The Realm cleave off and crumble into the void. Only that wasn't right; it didn't really fall away at all. It seemed to shift, and tumble backward, then shimmer in and out of existence. It was always different when a new section vanished. They never truly departed so much as shifted out of sync. Clint knew that if a man were to run from the island's edge in the sky and jump toward the newly cleaved section, he'd fall past it, through disparate worlds and doors. A man could go insane thinking of the million possible windows.

The worlds were a bag of fragile bones, broken by a blunt instrument. Now nothing fit.

In the past weeks, Clint and his erstwhile unicorn partner, Edward, had fallen into a routine, every bit a rut as any of their older rituals, on the trail or otherwise. Clint rose with the sun when there *was* sun (there wasn't on some days, though sky and void were filled on and off with a muted, shifting-colored hue, glowing enough for them to see) and would kindle a fire in his stove to brew coffee. The gunslinger would pour himself a cup, preferring it as black as their old foe the Darkness. Edward would stroll up to his door around an hour later, and then the unicorn (who'd never before liked coffee) would use his magic to pour himself a shallow dish. Then they'd sit on the porch and talk, and drink, and watch the worlds crumble as if what they saw were a flicker talkie instead of reality true.

Clint's property ended abruptly a few hundred feet from his front porch. Beyond it was a cut as clean as one gutted by a knife, and beyond the cut was an abyss. Clint had learned not to peer into the abyss. His first concern was practical: If he fell, he would tumble down into nothingness. The second reason came down to simple comfort. He didn't *like* looking into the abyss. When he looked over the drop for long enough, some trick of the eyes made him think he might be peering *up* rather than down. That — the feeling that direction and gravity had lost much of their meaning — set his head to spinning in too many ways and made him feel that at any minute he

might fall upward. So Clint stayed inside his house and exercised, tended his pen of frightened but still-intact turkeys, and brewed his coffee while waiting for Edward.

Now, waiting, Clint looked up (*true* up, meaning that which was opposite his planted feet) and saw a few great white birds circling in what remained of the sky. The world's ceiling wasn't exactly black or especially blue; even on days when the sun spit down from up high, the color was wrong. The birds circling his property were strange. They had long, heavy bodies and wings that spread out too far and too wide. They circled like normal birds, though, casting idle circles in the fathomless space above.

As he watched, one of the birds circled lower, growing larger, pumping its enormous wings. Clint could see its hocks, four legs, and hooves. Then the great bird cupped its wings for landing and stirred Clint's hair with billows of air (and yar, there was thankfully still air) as it came in for a landing. Hooves stomped into Clint's front yard. His porch shook.

"Clever, how you've made it so you're the only ones able to move around now," said the gunslinger, making room beside him for the winged unicorn to stand. "It's as if you knew this was coming all along, and only revealed your wings to rub it in our faces."

"That's exactly why we did it," said Edward. He folded his wings back, rustling them in a way that suggested the unicorn was making his body comfortable, like a stretch.

Clint sipped his coffee then stared into the fragmenting void. "The end of the worlds," he said.

"In a way," Edward replied. "But I prefer to think of it as a reset. All beings strive for order. They wish to build, to organize, to control. But nature and magic abhor order. Entropy is the natural way of things. What you call 'the end' is simply the end of order — for a while. This has happened before, of course. I was but a foal the first time we were forced to circle the sky while the world settled below us."

Clint raised his eyebrows. It wasn't normal for the unicorn to speak of the oldest times.

"By 'the end of order,' you mean the end of *humanity*."

"Eventually, yar."

"The end of *unicorns*."

"Depends on what you mean by 'end,'" said Edward.

Clint rolled his eyes at the unicorn's obtuse answer. "Will you ever just say what you mean, you great horned jerk?"

Edward gave an equine chuckle.

"I'm serious," said Clint. "Speak true to me once — just *once* — before it all falls apart. I'm supposed to be your partner."

"What do you want to know?"

"How can 'end' mean anything other than 'end'? What will happen to the worlds? How will we spend what time we have left? What happens in the void below? And is it only coincidence that my property has remained whole while my neighbors have fallen away? What happened to beget this? Why me? Why you? And why does none of this bother you, despite the fact that you died a few weeks ago, grew wings, and now face the end of days beside me?"

Edward sipped his coffee from the dish on Clint's porch. "The prophecies ended with the apocalypse," he said. "This is all the fertile, delightful ground of the unknown. Your property, if I had to guess, has been protected by the magic of the Triangulum Enchantem that you still wield in your blood and the magic that Mai gives, both from her presence inside you and her body's symbolic presence in the ground under your strangely thriving apple tree. In fact, the magic here is so strong that I may try to convince Cameron to come here with me, which benefits you because the presence of a second unicorn — whether you have come to accept her as my wife or not — will only strengthen the power of this place. The same goes for the rest of our ragtag crew ... except possibly for Boricio, whose bloodlust frightens me. And you ask, 'Why me?' The answer is 'Because I was chosen.' Why you? Because *I* chose *you*. There is no down or up anymore, yet you still stick to your soil, giving you the illusion of up, because the worlds, though splintered, are enormous, and still have a center of gravity that lies below your feet — though when filtered through enough shifts and shimmers, you might find that center to paradoxically be above you, beside you, or nowhere. And as to the rest? As to the story? Gunslinger, I've said *nar* to you not because you are too stupid to understand. You *are* stupid, of course, and ugly — but at this point, I'm tired, and the tale, once told, would be long enough to fill books and books."

Clint sipped his coffee. Something exploded in Meadowlands. Unbelievably, they were still trying to live as they had. Clint had flown with

Edward across the void once, touching down on the same high street where Clint had once faced Dharma Kold's forces in OldTown. They'd scouted the town, assuming it deserted, and found people bunkered with spark generators, trying to tune in to flickers.

"Come on," Clint said, sitting on his porch and looking up at Edward. "You have something better to do? It's the end of the worlds. Stories are all we have. What will we do? Wander the Sands?"

"We could, yar," said Edward. "The cracks start at the center. Ironically, the lands that were the most splintered back when we rode together are now the *least* splintered. We could return to Nazareth Shiloh. To Solace. We could relive the old days."

"Don't change the subject," said Clint.

"It's such a long story, gunslinger. And you humans live for such a short period of time."

"I want to hear it."

"And you're so old."

"And magical," said Clint, raising his cup. He was up past one hundred and sailing. But now that he'd claimed the power of the Triangulum as its true owner? Well. He might live to be a thousand.

The unicorn sighed. "It's so *loooooong*, Clint. If you wrote the story down, it would take over ninety-two thousand words to tell the basics."

"Hmm. So precise."

"And also, order matters. You've lived the middle of the story, and you'll live — hopefully — the end of the story in time. The end of the tale has only just started, so miring you in the beginning now will only confuse you. There is an ancient tale told by unicorns, about great battles in a galaxy far, far away. We know nar if the tale is legend or true, but the oldest unicorns told only the middle of that story. Scholars then added a beginning, and told that beginning *after* they told the middle. The tale became utterly stupid, filled with new angles and characters that the unicorns loathed."

"Mee-sa wanna hear the tale!" said a voice with a sea islands accent.

Clint turned and saw his old horse, Joe — son of Joe — who was in turn the son of Joe, who'd wandered up from his usual resting place in the pasture. The original Joe had drunk the magic water of the Rio Verde and learned to speak like an idiot. The later Joes hadn't drunk from the Rio but had held both the accent and the idiocy in their blood.

“I’m not telling the story with him around anyway,” said Edward, looking at Joe.

“How wude!” said Joe.

Clint continued to sit on the porch steps, still looking up at the unicorn. Joe munched grass and looked at Edward with his big, dumb eyes. Edward stared back defiantly but was the first to look away.

“Oh, fine,” he sighed. “It starts in the farback of time, back when I was a foal ... ”



CHAPTER 2

A LITTLE DITTY ABOUT JACK AND DIANE

A long time ago, in a meadow far, far away, a unicorn foal with long, skinny legs and a horn so small it looked like an oversized white mole ran across the sprawling lawns of Mead. The foal's legs were so long and so skinny in relation to his body and head (and his tiny little wings) that he looked constantly on the verge of collapse as he ran. It seemed as if he might go rump over head, rolling and stumbling as those long legs caught beneath him. But he didn't falter; his hooves stayed true as he screamed across Mead's north pasture, his wings twitching in anticipation. The knoll was ahead, and this time he would make it.

As Edward ran, his ammy and appy, Jack and Diane, watched from the edge, nibbling grass. Back in the earliest days, the grass had tasted sweet and rich because it was full of magic. *Everything* was full of magic. The air was scented with it; the clouds were made of it; the ground grew up from the Core as an expression of the natural outgrowth of balance. Jack ate grass, waiting for Edward to reach the knoll. Diane ate beside him, anticipating. They could fly, of course, as could their own am mies and appies. But Edward's wings were so small, and Edward was so eager. He ran as if willpower alone could propel him through the sky.

Edward's hooves thundered beneath him. He could feel his magical unicorn blood coursing through his body, through his working muscles. He was a proud steed, the divine hammer of white magic. He was an antenna made for the direction of power. His wings weren't yet fully grown, but he could do it. He *knew* he could do it.

"You can do it this time!" Jack yelled.

"We believe in you, Edward!" Diane echoed.

Edward thundered across the meadow's shallow rise. The knoll with the chipped-away downhill was ahead. He would leap, like yesterday and the day before, and flap his mighty unicorn wings. This time, he'd take flight — not just for a few feet and seconds but for as long as he wanted. All of the unicorns said that when you learned to fly, the learning happened all at once. It wasn't about strength so much as realizing the proper trick of movement. Find the trick, and everything fell into place. Edward's wings had tingled this morning. Today would be the day.

As he reached the lip of the knoll, he could almost feel the rarefied higher air flowing through his mane, past his ears, across the curved surfaces of his wings. The unicorns also said that once you learned to fly, it became effortless. You didn't need to try. You only had to coast, and feel your power.

Today was the day. Edward was certain.

The little unicorn reached the lip of the small hill, leaped, and gave a tremendous flap. Everything came alive. His powerful rear legs kicked him up; his wing flexors gripped the air. He felt the same tingle he'd felt earlier, giving him strength and filling him with belief. His lips wanted to curl up into the equine version of a triumphant smile. He felt a buoyancy in his chest, lifting him like a sprite. He was doing it. *He was doing it!*

But of course, Edward *wasn't* doing it, just as he hadn't done it every day in the past. His tiny wings couldn't find the wind no matter how hard they cupped and struggled. His leap was lost to a dive. Frantic flaps bought him a few airborne seconds before he tipped forward, his snout crashing into the ground with painful percussion. He rolled over, his four long legs becoming weapons dangerous even to himself. The ground knocked his sense of orientation loose, and while he lay on the grass, panting and heaving, it took him a moment to figure out which end was up and how his body had fallen.

"That was amazing," Jack said to Diane, walking closer. "*Tell* me you saw that."

Diane was laughing too hard to reply. She could only shake her great white head, her sides hitching as she fought for breath.

"I got it," said Jack. "Here. Check this out."

Edward rolled over, looking up at his appy. Jack's horn shimmered red, and a light seemed to project out from its tip. A smaller, less-corporeal version of Edward appeared in the air. He watched himself striving for the knoll. He saw how his lips had curled in concentration, his tongue wanting to protrude with the effort of his focus. The projection neared the hill's lip.

"Watch this," said Jack. "Watch his wings."

The projected Edward flapped his tiny wings. Leaped. His wings moved like a hummingbird. His eyes closed; his lip curled even tighter down. He rolled forward and crashed. His legs spilled everywhere, like a pile of long sticks dropped onto the ground.

Diane erupted in laughter. Jack looked at his wife then lost his own composure. The projection shimmered as he laughed, his giant blue unicorn eyes swollen with moisture. Edward simply watched. Then Jack said, “I love this part,” and replayed the actual crash over and over, forward and backward, pausing it at embarrassing stills. Edward saw his eyes open wide, and his mouth form a wide O of shock. He saw how one of his own legs had struck him in the face — something that, when his appy saw it, set off a new round of replays and guffaws.

“*Ammy! Appy!* Knock it off!” Edward complained.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” said Jack, lowering his head and wiping his streaming eyes against his forehoof. “It’s not funny.”

“Yar,” said Diane. “You’ll make it for sure tomorrow.”

“We believe in you!” said Jack. But he could barely complete the sentence because at the end of “you,” Edward’s appy trailed off into a high-pitched laugh.

The unicorn stumbled to his feet, glaring at his appies. “Did Grammy and Grappy do this to you, Appy?”

“You’re a unicorn prince, Edward, just as I was,” said Jack. “So yar, of course.”

“You shouldn’t laugh at me,” said Edward.

Jack chucked him with a hoof. “One day, you may have foals of your own. And if that happens, you’ll realize the joy of having someone with failures to laugh at.”

“And if you *don’t* have foals,” said Diane, “there are many others whose failures you can laugh at.”

Edward glared at his laughing appies. Then, as he had every day for the past several, he turned and walked away annoyed, headed anywhere they weren’t. However, despite his indignation, Edward found himself strangely undiscouraged. He would fly tomorrow. He knew he could do it. His appies’ ridicule was hardening him, making him even more determined and capable. He would show them. He was a unicorn prince! He was *destined* for greatness. He’d be the greatest unicorn warrior who ever lived. He’d fly higher than the sky — high enough to touch the sun. And when, one day, he had foals of his own (he’d have at least five, he thought, because there were five flowers he wanted to name them after: lily, daisy, dandelion, rose, and daffodil), he wouldn’t make fun of their failures. It didn’t matter what Ammy and Appy said about “the unicorn way.” He wouldn’t be a jerk like

his appy, and like appy's appy before him. There was so much sunshine and greatness in the world. Edward was determined to see that goodness — not jerkiness — triumphed.

Edward had a long time to cool down and think as he walked off into the woods, onto the slowly rising mountain trail. He walked and thought, walked and thought, ignoring time and focusing inward. He didn't even know where he was going as the morning sun arced overhead and settled in the middle of the opposite sky. He simply walked on and enjoyed the clean, magic-scented air, plotting his flying strategy. There was no need to cut short his meandering. No need for a destination in mind. But many hours later, Edward realized that his hooves had had a destination in mind all along as he found himself entering the Riverlands. He was nearing his grammy and grappy's place, clear on the other side of Mead. He'd walked too far. His appies would worry. They might already have found him missing, and might be wondering where he was.

But as soon as he thought it, his realization was severed by a flash of anger as he remembered their laughter.

"Good," he mumbled aloud. "*Let* them worry."

Still, Edward's irritation didn't last long because a magicked shelter — called a haven — soon appeared at the limit of his vision, beneath a cluster of trees. Edward loved to visit his grammy and grappy, Adam and Eve, because they were less caustic than his appies (though Jack said matter-of-factly that this was only because they were really old and would die soon) and because they told such excellent stories.

When Edward arrived, Grappy was outside, pouring magic from his horn into the soil. Gardening was something his grappy did that his appy didn't. Edward had always wondered why but had never asked. The small unicorn sensed a strange new bond forming between his grappies and himself lately. Mayhap today they would talk about it.

Adam was, like all unicorns, a pure and brilliant white. His horn was a shiny braid of pearlescent keratin that pulsed as he worked. Unlike Edward's ammy and appy, Adam and Eve's skin hung loose, especially around their joints, eyes, and mouths. They had wrinkles on top of wrinkles. Their movements were slower and more deliberate than the younger unicorns. Edward had, in fact, asked Grappy how old he was once. Grappy's response was strange. He'd said, "As old as possible."

Edward approached. Without thinking, he said, “Grappy, why are you slow?”

It was the innocent question of a foal, so Adam simply laughed, looked up at his grandson, and said, “Young sire! You are a very long way from home. How is your flying?”

“I fell. Again.”

“Well, the sun will come out tomorrow.”

“Yar. Ammy and Appy laughed.”

“Well,” said Adam, “they’re unicorns. But you keep at it. You’ll fly eventually. Great things are in store for you, young Edward.”

Edward rolled his equine eyes. This was something Adam and Eve said often, and even to Edward’s optimistic ears, it sounded like so much claptrap. All first-generation unicorns said things like that to the foals. It was meant to show them that everyone was special — but that they were more special than the rest.

“Grappy,” said Edward. “Did you laugh at Appy when he was a foal?”

“Oh,” Adam chuckled, “his failures were *beyond* hilarious.”

“And when *you* were a foal, did your appies laugh at you?”

“I was never a foal, Edward,” said Adam. “Neither was your grammy. You know that.”

Edward kicked at the dirt. That was the problem with Grammy and Grappy’s stories. There was no way to know what was true and what was unicorn droppings conjured by an ancient crazy mind. Instead of asking further, Edward nodded toward Adam’s garden.

“Grappy, what are you doing to those plants? I thought they grew on their own?”

Adam stopped projecting power onto the plants and looked up to meet Edward’s eyes. “Well, sir,” he said, “let me answer your first question. You asked why I was slow. Because if unicorns are magic, as you are now and will be more when your horn grows out, then why should we degrade? Why should our perfect white skin ever sag, or our movements grow slow and deliberate?”

Edward waited, nodding. He’d wondered that exact thing many times. Jack and Diane didn’t discuss concepts beyond their world because their world encompassed the unseen (like magic and prophecy), but also because, Edward suspected, they didn’t feel they had to. They would live forever and ever and ever.

“There comes a time,” said Adam, “when a being has used all it has been given and is grateful to move on. I could hold the magic inside me forever, but when you grow old enough, it starts seeming selfish to do so. I’m older than you can possibly imagine, young Edward. After enough time, I finally started to see that I’d done what I came here to do with the magic inside me. We started as vessels. We helped to grow this land, and in time, Grammy and I had your appy, who found your ammy and had you. I’ve shepherded where I could, guided who I could. And now it’s time for me to return what I’ve borrowed.”

Edward looked at the garden then at his grappy. He thought of the beam Adam had been projecting onto the plants, and how it seemed that the plants should grow on their own, without tending. What his mind assembled made him feel out of control, nearly panicked.

“Nar,” said Edward.

“*Yar*,” Adam countered in an *and-that’s-all-there-is-to-it* tone. “We have this garden and several others so that we can begin to return the magic we hold. Unicorns are but instances of magic, Edward. We are not the magic itself. What you think of as ‘Grappy’ is just a glob of white magic. It’s order where order cannot stay. So we return it, slowly. We let the world accept its magic, and one day soon, Grammy and I will die and return what we have to the aether.”

Edward felt his eyes starting to well up. “I don’t want you to die.”

Grappy walked closer and stood beside Edward, brushing his big white side against Edward’s smaller one.

“Edward, listen to me,” he said. “It would be greedy for me to hold onto my magic. Magic cannot be created or destroyed, but only changed from one form or being to another. Only a greedy being would hold onto what it has and halt that cycle. Only something impure would use magic for itself and refuse to give back. But you’re sad because we’ll be leaving, and that’s only natural. But you must understand that we’re not going anywhere. At night, just before you sleep, just as you fall from this world into the one in what you think of as your mind, you *feel* something. Another place. Am I right?”

Edward had. Only, he believed he was either imagining things or simply confused by approaching sleep. But it felt like a transition, like he’d been dipping his hoof into something larger and more important than he could ever be.

Edward nodded.

“That’s the Wellspring,” said Adam. “What some call the Core. But through the Wellspring, we are all connected. You are there, as am I and every other unicorn. Every single thing with the spark of magic and life is there. Everything can feel every other thing — if they can get out of their own way enough to see it. So yar, my body will die, and my elements will return to the soil. But my magic? That isn’t going any farther from you than it is today, and its return to the Wellspring will make the world stronger and more able to grow because I was the first. I will still be with you, Edward. Always.”

“In the Core.”

“Yar,” Adam said. “Where there is dark and light, coexisting in harmony. Where all things come from. Magic must go back, like the elements in my body. Nothing new is ever created. Stars died to create the elements in my bones and blood. And though Grammy and I don’t know of anything that came before us, something must have died in order to free the magic we became. Whatever that thing was — like the dying star — had to have magic plenty. If whatever thing or being it was had been selfish and held onto the magic it had instead of dying, I wouldn’t be here now for you to anticipate missing.”

“What came before you, Grappy?” said Edward.

“Nothing, that I know of.”

“How can there be nothing?”

“Exactly,” said Adam, smiling slightly. “Which is why I added, ‘that I know of.’”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well,” said Adam, “I’m glad you came by today. Because as our days draw short, your grammy and I have information we must pass on to you, as we once passed to your appy. We must do this so that after we’re gone, another part of what we were can carry on in you.”

“Okay,” said Edward, his somber mood rebounding. He mentally dismissed the thought that Grappy was going to give him a going-away speech and instead focused on the positive, as he always did and always had. Grappy was going to tell him one of his stories. That was good, whether Edward believed all of Grappy’s tall tales or not.

“Come inside the haven, Edward,” said Adam. “Grammy’s making marshmallow chocolate, and when it bubbles, we’ve much to discuss.”



CHAPTER 3

IN THE BEGINNING

Edward lay on the floor of the haven while Grammy and Grappy went about their unicorn business, magicking the place clean and setting items in order. Eventually, when the bowl of marshmallow chocolate that Adam had laid out for Edward ran dry, the two old unicorns stood up beside him. Then, because a unicorn always thought best on his hooves, Edward sprang up and stood to listen to the tale his grappies seemed ready to spin.

“Where should I start?” Adam asked, gumming at his lips. Edward recognized the mannerism. It meant that Edward was about to go on a wild ride — to hear a tale that might be true, might be untrue, or might be “true-ish.”

“How about when you and Grammy Eve met?” said Edward.

“Nar,” Eve said. She turned to Adam. “Start at the beginning.”

“In the beginning, there was nothing,” said Adam. “There were no animals, no creatures, no flowers, no ground, no up and no down — or at least no up and down that stayed fixed when you flipped end for end, which you couldn’t tell you were doing because there was nothing around for reference.”

“So it was just a big empty world?” said Edward.

“Nar,” said Adam. “There was *nothing*. Nothing at all. It’s hard to remember, as much as the world has thickened since, and even harder to describe. But no, there was no *world*. Nothing solid. No air. No light. But it wasn’t bright white, and it wasn’t precisely black, either. There was just me. So I floated that way for a really long time, but I don’t know how long because when you’re just a unicorn floating in the middle of nothing, time doesn’t pass quickly. So I taught myself to whistle. That may have taken years; I don’t know. And I know what you’re thinking — unicorns don’t normally whistle. But what would you do if you were just hanging there in space with nothing to do?”

Edward turned to Eve. “Is that true, Grammy?”

“Nar,” said Eve, giving her husband a look.

“Yar, it was!” said Adam. “I’ve forgotten the trick of whistling since, but it’s true just the same. Don’t listen to your grammy, Edward. She wasn’t there. I was floating for a long time, becoming the world’s first whistling unicorn, the world’s first unicorn, and the world’s first object all in one. And after a very, very long time, I started to hear this voice in my head. And the voice said, ‘Adam. Whistle me a ditty.’”

“Adam,” said Eve.

“All right, all right. What the voice said wasn’t important anyway. What matters is that there *was* a voice, and because the only thing I’d ever known was the sound of my own whistling and this voice, I wanted to talk to it. But I didn’t understand about talking, so I just kind of thought at it. Now, this was in the time before thoughts ... ”

“Adam,” Eve said again.

“But if you were to translate what I thought into a modern thought, it’d be this: ‘Hey! Voice! Give me something to do!’ But the voice must have been a unicorn because it just laughed at me and vanished for a while, and when it finally returned, I tried again, and again it mocked me. On the third time, I said, ‘Well, at least stick around and talk to me!’ But instead of listening, the voice said ‘Alakazam!’ and there was a popping that put your grammy beside me.

“At first, I was really excited — but not because there was another unicorn. Remember, there was nothing, so I didn’t know what a unicorn was or that I was one myself. I seemed to see these white sticks under me, and if I turned my head, I saw this huge white butt. But I didn’t get that they were a part of me, just that they were the only things to look at. So when I say that I was excited when your grammy showed up, I mean that I was excited because I could tell when I was upside-down. Suddenly there was a point of reference. And for a long time, I was totally engrossed with knowing when I was sideways, backward, spinning, moving, rotating around her, and so on. It was an exciting time.”

“That’s not exciting,” said Edward.

Eve was still eyeing Adam, but Adam just looked down at Edward and said, “Oh, but it was! You’re spoiled these days. Back in my day, rotating and turning around was all the rage. After so long in nothingness, the ability to change what I saw was amazing. Sometimes I couldn’t sleep because I was so excited to find new ways to turn.

“Anyway, we didn’t have light then either — and don’t ask me how we could see each other without light because your generation would never be able to understand the answer. We didn’t know we were sitting there in the nothingness like two seeds in the dirt, waiting for light, because we didn’t know what light was. But we were waiting, and when light arrived, we knew it. The voice in my head showed up and said, ‘Alakazam!’ and then whatever blackness or almost blackness we’d been in shattered, and then there was light, but it was everywhere. It didn’t come from the sun or from magic, but from all over. And then we were just in a giant white space, and in a way it bothered me because when I looked at your Grammy, she blended right in with her background.

“But after a while, the light diminished, and night came, except that it didn’t come from the sun disappearing — because there was no sun. The light simply bled from the world, and we were back as we had been. I thought the light was gone forever, but a while later it returned. That was the first day and the first night. Now, you thought rotating was exciting? Day and night had us beside ourselves. Literally, because we were beside each other in the void. We said, ‘This is amazing! Let’s name these things! I vote that from now on, when it’s dark, it will be “night” and when it’s light, it will be “day!”’ I took a vote, and it was unanimous. And so the cycle began, once it was official.”

Edward turned to Eve. “Is Grappy telling the truth?”

“Shh,” she said.

“Well, the problem with night and day, once we got over the excitement, was that it marked time for us. We became very aware of evenings, dawns, and the passage of days. And so the invention of light was also the invention of boredom because there was *absolutely nothing to do*. We couldn’t drink from rivers and lakes or eat sweet grass — not that we understood that we might ever want to — and we couldn’t run through fields or stand in the shade or talk to anyone other than each other. We couldn’t play magic games. We couldn’t magick objects around.

“That went on for a while, and the voice in my head — and in your grammy’s head — said as the light returned, ‘And behold, for this is the first day!’ And I thought back: ‘Um, no, there have been, like, fifty days,’ and the voice said, ‘Nar, you’re wrong,’ and I was like, ‘Nar, I’m not wrong,’ and the voice was like, ‘Those were practice days and don’t count,’ and so I just said, ‘Hey, I’ve been here watching it and getting really bored

despite this whatever it is I have to talk to (remember, identity and romance were in wait for creation), and so I'm totally sure that this isn't the first day,' and the voice just said, 'Well, let's just see whose story becomes the official version,' and that was the creation of creative accounting.

"Well, once the voice started keeping score, things happened faster, which was nice. On the second day, magic smeared the world like color on canvas, then hung a beautiful blue sky on the top. Our feet finally felt the ground as gravity bloomed. We started to notice that we could feel the magic in our horns, and although we didn't know what it was, the urge to use it felt so obvious. It just came out of us. We painted the world with dandelions and daffodils, peonies and lilacs. And forget-me-knots. Those were my invention, and with them, we saw the creation of a male first truly impressing a female because your grammy looked at the forget-me-knots and said, 'That looks tight.' And that was the creation of slang."

"Grappy!" said Edward.

"It was an amazing time, Edward," said Eve, taking over. "Right now, even with your small horn, you know what magic feels like inside you. We learned that, too, but only afterward. At the time, all we knew was that it felt normal, and right, and simply *how it was*. We knew we could create but didn't realize at the time just how powerful that first magic was."

"I told you that the total amount of magic in the world never changes," said Adam. "Well, this was the first burst. In the beginning, all the world's magic was together in one place. We were using it — or perhaps we were *being used* by that phantom voice in order to use magic on the voice's behalf — to create everything you see around you and all that has ever existed. And as we filled the world, the magic spread out to find its corners. Magic went into the daisies and the daffodils. It went into the other plants, and then into the other forms of life. It went to the Core once there was a Core. And when that happened, we were left with what would become our normal allotment of magic — which, considering we were the first and only unicorns, was a lot. Looking back, even compared to what we have at our disposal today, that diminished magic we were left with seems fathomless. It was as if we were guided. We made rocks and mountains and rivers and seas. Clouds appeared in the skies, and the winds came, along with animals and bugs and all of the tiny things in the soil. We lost track of it all, so powerful was that time. Magic was beyond our control, all of it in our hooves as it flew out to the world's crevices. We spent those first days in a

fugue. We don't know what we made and what was made for us by the magic as it careened out with a mind of its own. But after a while, the magic our horns wielded began to thin. By then we were exhausted, and so we slept. The voice said, 'Good week, unicorns.' I said, 'If every week is like that, I'm going to create unions.'"

"What's a union?" said Edward.

Adam plowed forward: "After the seas and skies and ground and caves and fields and mountains were teeming with life, we both felt that the magic was on its ebb, though we still had a final burst left. And so to use that magic, we created something for ourselves. Something we did on impulse because it seemed like we might enjoy it. It was the creation of selfishness — because we'd worked so hard. We created, in the middle of what became Mead, a gigantic peach tree bursting with fruit."

"Mmm," said Edward. He absolutely loved peaches.

"Yar," said Eve. "But this tree didn't bear the peaches you know today."

"Why not?" said Edward.

"Because up until that point, we'd operated as the agents of creation. We were purely benevolent beings, doing work for the other purely benevolent beings that would follow. We did what the magic told us to do. But in the end, we created that tree for one reason only."

"What reason was that?" Edward asked.

"Because *we* wanted it," said Adam.



CHAPTER 4

THE DARK TREE

The tree, Adam explained, was dark magic's first appearance in the world. Edward asked why the world had to have bad magic, but Adam and Eve both briskly shook their heads at the question — not because it was a wrong question but because of what it implied.

Throughout his young life, Edward had fallen into thinking what was the default for most beings, be they unicorns or otherwise: He'd come to believe (despite constant reminders to the contrary from both his appies and grappies) that white magic was *good* and that dark magic was *bad*. But as they told him about the tree, both Adam and Eve reiterated that dark and light magic are opposites — and nothing more. The world had named one dark and one light, or one black and one white. And the creatures of the world had then, for some reason, decided that one was “better” than the other. But, Adam insisted, neither kind of magic was good or bad in and of itself. Both were needed. In the end, the world had been conceived as perfectly balanced — composed most properly of what Edward, in his young way, might have considered to be “gray” magic. Unicorns had been created as embodiments of pure light, and that meant that an equal and opposite clump of darkness was required to balance them out. Magic could not be created or destroyed; it merely moved from one place to another, changing its form. The tree, said Adam, was the unicorns' other half. It *had* to exist because *they* existed.

“In a way,” said Adam, “the tree was a test. Up until the tree was born, the world was perfect, insofar as ‘perfect’ means what we'd think of as perfect today. But, young Edward, what else did I say the world was back then?”

“Boring,” said Edward.

“Yar,” said Adam, gesturing toward Edward with a stretched neck. “Or stagnant, or unchanging, or predictable. When there is only one stream of magic, there is never, ever any variety. How can a pure white being take a path other than the one before him? How can anything truly new ever be created? How can one have new experiences? Nar, the world needed our opposite. We had to be *polluted* by the dark — and I use that word deliberately because it's not *pollution* at all. Once the magic settled and we

created that tree, we spit that darkness from inside us and again became custodians of the white. A unicorn can have dark in him, yar, but a healthy unicorn is, for all intents and purposes, a steward of the white. Which is as it was intended, because darkness was born into the world to oppose us — to force us down different paths, to force us to *choose*. If necessary, its purpose forced us to die. To perpetrate evil, if there is such a thing. But do you understand that without that contrast — without the counterpoint that black gives to white and white gives to black — that there can never be anything in the world that makes it worth living inside?”

Edward didn’t understand but pretended that he almost did. Eve smiled down, seemingly knowing the thought was beyond him, but happy the seed had been planted.

“So the tree,” Adam went on, “was a way of forcing white magic into conflict with black magic ... the same as light — then the intruding, alien force — came into existence in order to oppose the dark. And once that tree was born from something that might be called ‘selfishness,’ the world had a choice. *We* had a choice. The pure white beings were *perverted* into a situation that was no longer clearly the martyr’s path, and the world was better. You may know versions of this legend, Edward, but this was *not* the birth of evil. This was the birth of *momentum*. Without that tree, we might have lived forever in peace and harmony ... and nothing ever, ever, ever would have happened.”

“So the Darkness was good?”

“That first spark of darkness forced a choice on the world,” Adam said. “Even if we ignored it, we were no longer just *existing* so much as we were *choosing to ignore it*. The tree provided a fork in the road. It started the engine of conflict. *Conflict* drives this world. Never, ever, ever wish for an end to conflict, Edward. Those who wish for an end to conflict don’t understand that there is a level of existence behind all you see, like the area behind the curtain of one of Flim Flam Matthews’s stage shows. This machine — the world around you — was set in motion for a reason. Now, no one knows that reason, and I won’t know it until I return to the Wellspring. But if you ask me, I think the world was started to provide the experience of growth, and growth only comes through conflict. Through *choice*. Through *decision*. But in order to decide, there must be two options. There are always two necessary sides on each blade of grass.”

Edward nodded.

Adam continued telling his story, explaining how the tree in Mead grew and grew and grew. As more unicorns were born, the tree continued to grow. As fish filled the seas and the skies sparkled and all of the creatures lived in peace and harmony, the tree grew ever larger. Nothing, said Adam, needed to eat anything else. There was no predation. Flowers bloomed, and nothing consumed them. Everything flourished. Everything grew tall and blossomed. None of the plants withered. None of the beings grew old. None of the fish were stolen from the seas and devoured. It was, said Adam, a paradise.

As life blossomed unfettered, the overabundance of white magic spilled out and created new strains of life. Pixies appeared. Fairies were born. Elves sprang into existence in peaceful tribes that roamed the grass, never trampling a blade. Unicorns made friends with the other creatures and formed alliances — because alliances were all that *could* be formed. But the races of creatures didn't precisely work together, Adam explained, because there were no goals to surmount. There was no enemy. No obstacles. Magic was so abundant that all the beings had to do was to want a thing, and it appeared. Unicorns, elves, and the others were fruitful, and multiplied.

All the while, the tree grew larger and larger. Adam said that the roots broke the soil around the tree's base, each root as big as his middle. The branches grew thicker and split off, each one begetting dozens of others. Fruit sprang from the tree: peaches as pink and as dripping with juice as if they were bags of water. They dappled the tree, blushing its top from a distance. But nobody ate the peaches because nobody needed to eat anything. It was paradise. Everything could grow, and nothing had to die.

"But still, everyone was afraid of the tree," said Adam. "Its growth was aggressive. Unicorns multiplied and dispersed, and grass grew and formed waves of green, but the tree's growth swallowed everything around it, nudging other life aside so that its roots could spread. The tree seemed to want more and more for itself. Looking back, it was like a giant hand stretching into Mead from below, from the dark side of the Core, and the farther it stretched the surface of Mead like a tight glove, the more it threatened to rip open and spill dark magic into our world like split innards. Elves traded whispers, speaking of cutting the tree back in order to retard its growth. They wanted to push it down like a bubble, to force the dark back to the other side where it belonged. But see, *we* were the ones causing that tree to swell. *We* were feeding that tree because we continued to spread the

light. There was too much light in our world, and so darkness tried to enter it in the way entropy always tries to equal out opposites. We were building that pressure through our stubborn insistence that our world be ‘perfect.’ In our lack of flaws, *we* were flawed. Our perfection *was* our flaw. Does that make sense?”

Edward shrugged.

“This is important, Edward. You don’t know it, but you, as prince among the third generation of unicorns, have an important role to play in the world. And I’ll tell you this — that role will involve conflict.”

“Sure, Grappy,” said Edward.

Adam stared at the little unicorn, seeming to feel that his point was missing its home.

“He’s hearing you,” said Eve.

“Anyway, the tree became this ominous presence in Mead. It presided over great meadows and plains, stretching from its roots to the Core, scraping sky and brushing mountain tops. Or at least, that’s how it seemed. The elves wanted to leave. The unicorns wanted to fight it because it was something so contrary to their nature that it disturbed them in the way a unicorn of a different color would disturb us today. The pixies and fairies avoided it. Same for rabbits, squirrels, beavers — pretty much anything with buck teeth.”

Adam made buck teeth at his grandson. Edward laughed.

“Eventually, the elves *did* leave. They marched off, but the next day we’d see them coming from the opposite direction, mounting a rise. Then they’d try to leave again, scaling the mountains, and we’d see them later emerging from a valley. They headed away, and yet the tree stayed with them, as if the world was too small and the tree couldn’t be fled.

“The unicorns, after a great debate, tried using their magic to sever its branches — not to kill it, because we couldn’t bring ourselves to do such a thing, but to prune it back. We found it untouchable. None of us wanted to fall in its shadow. We tried staying away, but in time it was like the tree had grown legs and would follow us. It didn’t, of course, but it was something that demanded our constant attention. We couldn’t ignore it, and were eventually forced to face it. We had to turn and acknowledge the tree and its somehow aggressive fruit that demanded consumption. And when we did acknowledge it, the tree bewitched us. Not as a simple temptation but as a *compulsion*, like a ferrite and a stick of polarized alloy. We were drawn to

the tree — almost dragged there by our nature. It felt like the tree wanted us not only to listen to it but to merge with it. As if it wanted to rip its Darkness up through Mead and grab us.”

Adam paused for effect, seeming to gauge Edward’s reaction. The young unicorn looked up, patiently waiting to hear the story’s end. He understood much of what Adam was saying, but the story was mostly just interesting as a story, like all of Grappy’s tall tales.

“So what happened?” said Edward.

“The tree spoke,” said Adam.

“It *spoke* to you?”

Adam shook his big white head. Then he nodded to Edward’s other side, toward Eve.

“Why did it speak to you, Grammy?” said Edward.

Eve’s sagging skin and loose lips were trumped by her blue unicorn’s eyes, which had, through all of her years, remained young and sharp.

“Because,” she said, “I was the only one willing to listen.”



CHAPTER 5

TWO HALVES OF A WHOLE

As Edward watched, his grammy took over the story. Adam settled in, content to listen to his wife.

Eve told the old and young unicorn that the world was full of messages that most beings failed to heed. There was a quiet voice inside of everything (a voice on the wind, a notion that feels like a push from the core of a being) and that those who could learn to hear those voices would find themselves able to perform magic of a sort — with or without a horn.

“Unicorns are no different from humans in that way,” Eve added.

At this, Edward felt his hair bristle, hungry to stand on end. Humans were a source of great debate, and his grappies’ stance had not always made Adam and Eve popular with the other unicorns.

“Unicorns, though they are born of light magic, can be stubborn and willfully blind,” Eve continued. “In a way, a dogged determination to be righteous and moral and pure can lead to more evil than evil itself. The unicorns of early Mead were like that. They were the first creatures: the chosen few, for whom the world was created. They felt they didn’t have to listen to anyone, and felt they were better than those beneath them. So in a way, we had conflict without conflict — but when it came to the tree, everyone agreed. The tree seemed to call us, but the world was so pure and clean and the tree was so dark that no one wanted to listen. I thought the strength of compulsion alone was reason to at least *consider* the tree rather than fearing it. But no one agreed, so I went by myself. And what I found was that as with the world’s other whispers, the tree had a voice of its own. I stood by and listened while the others stood back with scowls on their perfect, angelic faces. They thought I was associating with the enemy, even before anyone understood what an ‘enemy’ was. Their fear of the tree was deep in their guts, born out of the tree’s difference. My interest in the tree came from exactly the same emotion — but for me, it was about wanting to *understand* its difference.”

“What did the tree say, Grammy?” said Edward.

Eve stood taller, her old back straightening with what Edward took for pride. She told them that the tree had introduced itself as a proper being: not just dark magic, but “Darkness,” as if that were its name. It told her that it

was the opposite of Mead's pure light. It did not deceive her, Eve insisted, contrary to what some said when they recited the tale. She knew what the tree was from the start. She knew what the tree wanted. She knew what would happen if she gave it a way into the world they'd built. But the tree was born of balance — born, in fact, from the unicorns' own actions — and to Eve, *balance* mattered more than their so-called perfection.

As the unicorns made Adam's forget-me-knots bloom with their white magic, they fed the tree.

As the elves did good deeds, they fed the tree.

As the residents of Mead existed in conflict-free harmony, they collectively fed the tree.

The creatures of Mead thought they could build one side of the light/dark balance without building the other, but they were wrong. Everything they did actually built *both* sides, and until light and dark were allowed to fall into conflict and grind the new world forward, Darkness would build and build as a tremendous, daunting pressure.

"The Darkness told me we had a choice," said Eve. "We could continue to build our perfect one-sided paradise until the tree's roots shattered the world, or we could let the dark magic in — accepting flaws and fallibility into Mead — and watch the world churn, as it was meant to. We could trade everlasting life for mortality. We could trade persistent peace for occasional war. We could counterbalance happiness with sadness. We could trade some of our ease for a commensurate amount of difficulty and strife. We could choose to die — but to make the time until we did more worth living."

"You wanted things to be bad?" said Edward.

"Two halves of a whole, Edward," said Eve. "But think about something: If we return to the Wellspring in the end, then how is death 'bad'? If difficulty and war and sadness that only affect this plane turn out not to matter in the Wellspring, then how can it be 'bad' to experience those things, in the big picture? Great unicorn storytellers use conflict to create their art. Within the worlds of their stories, when things stagnate, they create a fight. They will get their characters arguing because clarity comes from *differences*, not persistent sameness."

It still didn't sound right to Edward. Many unicorns his age already had fully developed (albeit small) horns, and those unicorns constantly ridiculed Edward about his own stub, which was basically a large, hard nubbin. When they mocked him, it made Edward feel bad. How could that possibly

be good? Or was Grammy implying that there might be some benefit (or at least “not mattering”) in the future — something Edward was too young and too narrow-minded to see in Eve’s great truth? Was she implying that ridicule might change him in some way that would “move him forward” (whatever that meant) when he was older, and make him better in the long run than he would have been without that pain and strife?

“You don’t understand,” said Eve, watching the young unicorn.

Edward shook his head. His white mane billowed.

“Well,” said Eve with a sigh, “you’re not alone. The others didn’t understand then, and the elders in our governing Blessing — like Fiona and Clarence — still don’t understand today. But what is happening now with humans and their new city is proving me right. You cannot cater to only one side of the magic. You *must* accept both.”

“Stupid humans,” said Edward, because he thought it was what his grammy would want him to say. But Adam and Eve both looked at him seriously instead of with approval, and Edward looked away, thinking he might have said the wrong thing.

“Anyway,” said Eve, her gaze even, “I listened to the tree day by day, week by week. I watched the other creatures watch me. They didn’t like that I listened to the tree, but they were pure white and couldn’t imagine opposing me in any way that would make a difference. They picked their flowers. They bathed in golden streams. Everything in Mead grew and grew and grew. And as it did, the tree grew as well. Every time I returned, its voice was louder and stronger, like someone slowly waking from a deep sleep. Landmarks I’d seen on the grass were devoured by the tree’s trunk as it expanded. I could feel its sides seem to shake as if with pressure. It told me that it wouldn’t last much longer. So I went into my own mind, into my magic, and searched for that first voice we’d heard. I never found it again but did begin to have dreams of sundering worlds — of the tree splitting everything we’d built like dry wood. I began to see that the tree was right. Being white magic creatures, we didn’t like what the tree represented, but that was just us being proud — something I don’t have to tell you unicorns tend to be, to the point of becoming stupid and blind and forgetful. We couldn’t help but judge what was different from us. But even with that aside, ours was a choice between dark and darker. We could suffer a little now, or suffer a lot later. Both options were difficult.

“So I asked Adam what he thought. I whispered to the other living things (those who would listen, and weren’t too proud). I tried asking the voice, but all I heard back was my own voice — as if that great power from the beginning was there but wasn’t going to help me, and was instead going to force me to decide on my own. I asked the tree, always remembering to take its advice for what it was as it urged me to help it sow its fruit in Mead’s fertile soil. The legends you may hear about your grammy make me sound weak and impulsive, but I was anything but. The knee-jerk reactions came from others, who wouldn’t even consider the issue before rejecting it. I took *months* to consider. I saw the world start to shudder and crack. I peered into the chasms that began to form around Mead that the others pretended weren’t there. I felt the tree quake under my touch, shaking like an imminent explosion. And in the end, I decided to do what the tree suggested. I decided to pierce the veil between our worlds — to let the dark magic stream into Mead a little at first, to release the pressure.”

Edward’s big, blue eyes were rapt with attention. He looked up at Eve and said, “How did you do that, Grammy?”

Eve nodded at her grandson. “You know the legends, Edward,” she said. “I ate a peach from the tree.”



CHAPTER 6

EATING THE PEACH

Eating the peach, said Eve, was a symbolic act of acceptance. She knew full well what the tree was (it had even gone so far as to introduce itself by name), and she chose to take a part of it into her pure, white-magic body.

“I felt the change immediately,” said Eve. “When the first bite of that peach fell into my stomach, I felt a kind of quenching, like putting water on a fire. My stomach didn’t destroy the peach, and the peach didn’t destroy anything in me. The two, together, became something new, between light and dark. It was like when human thinkers combine a science acid with a science base, creating something that is neither. Matter and antimatter. Black paint and white paint combining to make gray. As the peach moved through me, I changed it, and it changed me.

“But once I’d taken that first bite, it stopped being like acids and bases and multicolored paints; the change had been like pricking a hole in an overfull sack of water. I didn’t need to eat more, or get the others to eat from the tree. My single bite began the process for all of us. Dark magic leaked into our perfect world, starting in me.

“At first, it scared me. I could feel the change spreading out from my middle, making me something different. It was changing me so much that at the beginning, I thought I’d made a mistake and had doomed us all. Then I found that my mind gained a new clarity. I could see courses of action I’d nar considered before. I began to find things I didn’t like about the others, whereas I’d previously loved them all without the slightest of flinches. But it’s good, Edward, to see imperfections. Because as the change spread to Adam, we saw things between us that differed — and at first those differences scared us. But then we started to talk and to explore and to try things that we’d never have tried before because they didn’t feel like pure white magic. Our differences *made us better*, and made us better companions. The elves started fighting as the change spread to them. They formed separate tribes rather than one large group. The tribes sometimes got along and sometimes fought. But then, after that, they began to explore and build because the gaps between what they could do and what they wanted to do grew suddenly insistent. Creatures began to eat other creatures, and we all ate the plants — even the beautiful forget-me-knots. But there were

always more creatures, and more and more flowers, and as one form of magic was consumed by another, the effect was like stirring a giant pot of stew. Life no longer required creation magic to flourish. It gained a new kind of magic all its own. It was like a great machine had been started, and plants mixed into other plants, creating new and more delicious fruits and vegetables. Animals mixed and created new strains. Once everything became threatened with death, amazing new adaptations began to blossom in the animals. The ones who lived longest and most reliably gave birth to offspring became those who could survive best in our new world of conflict, and as a result, the conflict made them harder and better. Certain animals gained shields, and others speed. Yet others gained knowledge, and grew able to think themselves out of danger.”

“Like humans?” said Edward.

“Like humans,” Adam agreed, stepping in. “Elves were here from very early on, but they were imbued with the original magic. Humans weren’t magic, except in a few rare cases — and yet they bloomed as if they were. We watched as hairy tree dwellers lost their tails then learned to use tools. We watched those creatures stand upright, grow tall and soft, shedding most of their hair. Then we watched these frail things with no magic or defenses form groups and societies, outsmarting animals much larger and stronger than they were due to superior minds.”

“But Grammy and Grappy,” said Edward. “Um ... didn’t that ruin the beauty of Mead? I heard that the peach thing and the Darkness created the briars and the thistles.”

“Possibly,” said Adam. “But I think it depends on how you look at it. Yar, we saw thistles and blight as the tree spilled into our world. We saw thorns and brambles and saw whole areas swallowed by fire. But what remained seemed more beautiful to our eyes once we had something to compare it to. You must remember, Edward: There are only a handful of unicorns still alive who remember what it was like in Mead before the tree grew too large. Most of the unicorns today think that a perfect world would be beautiful, but young sire ... there’s simply no sustaining beauty in a uniformly beautiful world. That so-called beauty is simply ‘how things are’ when there is no ugliness for contrast.”

“What happened to the tree?” Edward asked.

“It shrank,” said Eve. “It became a normal tree. The Darkness left it, slowly deflating into Mead through the slit I’d made between our worlds.

The pressure left, and our world stopped being pure light, and the tree stopped being pure dark. For a while, we lived in a world of perfectly balanced gray. There were clumps of unbalanced light and dark, of course, but they were small. Unicorns were still very, very close to pure light. Same for elves. But other dark creatures then came to balance us out: trolls, gargoyles, ghoulem. But across Mead, taken as a whole, things were exactly as they should be. There was light and dark; the two lived together in harmony the same as day and night share the sky.

“Humans continued to proliferate, but they were still new. They were strange creatures — approximately half light and half dark, unlike almost anything else in existence. In a way, humans were perfect — despite the opinions of unicorns then and unicorns now. *We* were flawed because of our lack of flaws, but humans were flawed to their very cores. There was no resisting the peach tree that lived inside of humanity; they accepted it fully and feasted from its fruit.”

Edward stared up at Adam, starving for more words. Adam smiled and continued.

“But as millennia passed, as your grammy and I had foals of our own — your appy and his brothers and sisters — the humans became more and more advanced. The unicorns didn’t like the humans’ advancing and their innate darkness, so they stayed away. The humans knew we existed, and in no time at all they seemed to know exactly what we were. They sent parties to watch us because they were curious. We’d see them at the edge of Mead from their new tribes on our outskirts, poking their heads up and observing what we did. Sometimes we’d blast spells to make them go away, but mostly we just abided them since they seemed harmless, and not much different from lions or boars.

“So for a long, long, long time, we grew as two distinct groups: humans on one hand and unicorns on the other. The animals had no affiliation and went back and forth, the elves fell mainly into seclusion, and the dark creatures haunted us both. Humans grew ever more intelligent, until their brains began to approach the level of ours. We had magic, but for us that was almost a crutch. Humans had taken full advantage of the conflict catalyst, fighting and killing and warring and feuding and trying to survive *without* the aid of magic, and the humans who made it through those hard years were razor sharp, having been honed like blades. Unicorns are proud

and pretend that humans are stupid, but humans are not stupid. Strip us of our magic, Edward, and humans are essentially our equals.”

Edward wanted to protest. Everyone knew that humans were stupid and beneath mention compared to the superior unicorns, but Grappy had taken many barbs over his advocacy of human rights. Edward wasn't convinced but knew it was disrespectful to argue.

Adam sighed. “It might have been better, looking back, if human relations had been established earlier than they were. But in the beginning, humans were no different from rabbits and fish. The hairy no-longer-tree-dwellers could use sticks and rocks to get food, but that seemed like novelty at most. By the time they started to cluster and hunt, I began to suspect their species was different. But because they live such short lives, they are forever facing that sharpening edge of survival in never-ending conflict, and none of it magic. Before we could blink, they'd crossed some kind of a chasm and were conscious, cognizant beings. But by then unicorns' opinions of humans had already hardened, and their opinions of us as arrogant outsiders had gone through several generations. We ignored them, and they ignored us. And before we knew it, a thousand years had passed in vague animosity.”

“Couldn't you go and talk to them?” said Edward.

“We could have, sure, and some tried, but prejudices are hard to change,” said Adam. “The unicorn emissaries — I was one — were treated like idiots. The others asked why we bothered with such base, animalistic, dark creatures. And on the other side, we found that most humans didn't wish to hear us. They saw us as threatening, arrogant beasts. We'd had a millennium of separation, and that's all it took for distorted perceptions of each other to form and root among both them and us.” Adam laughed. “And besides ... the humans rode horses.”

Edward felt his snout want to bunch up in irritation. *Horses*.

Adam looked at Edward and laughed harder. Eve joined him.

“Horses are just animals, Edward,” said Adam, trying and failing to keep his voice steady as Edward's horse-loathing overtook him. “They look just like us, but you can't hold that against them. They can't help how they are, and they can't help that they can't talk or use magic, and are generally quite dumb when compared to ‘the great and mighty unicorn race.’” Adam said the last with heavy sarcasm. “Personally, I think horses were a joke at our expense. I think that very first voice I heard in the void has never

stopped nudging evolution along, helping it and tweaking it as necessary. Take flamingo-birds. How could something so ridiculous arise by coincidence? Look at the platybeaver. Is it waterfowl or a land animal? Horses, I think, were that thing's way of knocking us down a peg. It said, 'You take yourselves so seriously? All right, here's something dumb made in your image.' But do you want to know a secret? I always liked horses, mayhap because I got the joke. Being an old unicorn has its advantages, and not caring too much what others think of you and being able to laugh at yourself are certainly two."

"You *like* horses?" said Edward. He was aghast. His grappy might as well have just said that he enjoyed bathing in manure. It was the sort of thing Edward didn't know he'd be able to get past. Would he ever be able to respect Grappy again?

Adam gave an equine shrug. "Horses paired with humans almost from the beginning," he said. "The bond made life better for both species, proving that one plus one can sometimes equal three. Humans gained the ability to go farther and move faster, opening new avenues of trade and expansion. Horses gained stable sources of food, shelter, and protection from the wild."

Edward snorted, unconvinced. In the short lull that followed, Eve returned to refill Edward's marshmallow chocolate and her own. Adam walked a few steps toward the haven's open end, seeming to stare off wistfully into the distance. But when Edward came up beside him, he realized his grappy wasn't simply looking out at nothing. In the distance, Edward saw a low cluster of buildings: a small human settlement of huts that exemplified the animosity with the outside world Adam had mentioned humans tended to have. They'd built a wall around it.

"Grappy?"

"Yar, young Edward."

"Is that the end of the story? We're at the now, with humans and all ... but ... is that the end?"

"Does it seem to you as if something is missing?" Adam asked, his sagging lips lined in a soft smile.

"Yar," said Edward.

"What's missing?"

"Well, nothing, I guess. But it was such a *long* story — which is great, of course — and so it seems like there should be a ... I don't know ... a

reason for telling a story that long.”

“A moral,” said Adam, again looking into the distance. “A moral to the story?”

“Yar.”

“Well, there’s one piece I haven’t told you yet,” said Adam, “and I think that once you hear it, you’ll understand why I told you this story, and what I hope you’ll get from it.”

“What’s the last piece, Grappy?”

Adam looked down at Edward then nodded his horn toward the cluster of buildings in the distance.

“Edward,” said the world’s oldest unicorn, “I want to tell you about the Realm.”



CHAPTER 7

THE REALM

“The Realm?” said Edward.

“That’s what they’re calling that settlement,” said Adam, again indicating the cluster of human dwellings. He laughed. “And unicorns are supposed to have egos! I’ve seen their ‘Realm’ up close. It’s a scattering of shacks. Micro-centers for trade. But they have a leader, and he lives in a nicer hut than the rest, and they have put pickets around it as if pickets would matter to a unicorn ... or a troll, for that matter.”

Edward looked at the ramshackle assortment of buildings pocking the horizon. It was beyond unimpressive. The place was probably rife with horses. It certainly didn’t seem worthy of a day’s long discussion by his grappy.

“Um ... ” said Edward.

“Oh, it doesn’t look like much,” said Adam, “but it worries me, and I’ve learned from experience that if you turn your back on humans for a few decades, they’ll grow and grow and grow. This feels to me like the very beginning of something not unlike the tree in Mead — and this time, I don’t want us caught unaware. We let humans grow into our adversaries because they change so much faster than we do, and now that they’re building walls — even ineffectual walls like that one? Well, it fills me with foreboding.”

“Why?” said Edward.

“Well,” said Adam, “to explain that, we must go backward a bit again, to the dawn of humanity. It wasn’t long ago by unicorn standards, but that’s exactly why I want to watch this situation closely now, before things change in a blink.”

Eve brought out more steaming marshmallow chocolate, held in front of her on a pillow of light yellow magic. She set Edward’s dish before him, then another in front of her husband, and a final one in front of herself.

“Magic is everywhere, Edward,” Adam said. “All you need to do is find ways to access it. That’s simple for us and for the other creatures born in magic, but humans were born without it. Without it *inside them*, that is. But they’re crafty, and curious, and soon they began finding old bits of life — like pieces of the earliest plants and trees — and noticing how, when they held their minds just right, those objects would sparkle and light up. Now,

the humans aren't *doing magic*, you understand. We can *do* magic, but they can only pick it up and use it where they find it. But this is a magical world, and magic permeates everything. It runs below the surface in enormous rivers that branch off into the world's every nook and cranny. It's sprinkled through the soil, causing everything to grow. For those who know how to use magic, it's almost like it's lying around in great piles, waiting to be gathered. And the humans, being crafty, discovered how to use it. Except that's not quite right. They didn't find out *how* to use it. They found out *that* they could."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is in understanding." Adam turned toward Edward. "Imagine you're walking through Mead and you discover an object that will produce steaming marshmallow chocolate whenever you touch it. And it's the best marshmallow chocolate ever, and ready at your need. It doesn't need to steep in magic for three days like your grammy's. You need only to touch the thing, and sweet marshmallow chocolate is delivered. Got it?"

Edward licked his lips. He loved marshmallow chocolate. "Okay."

"So you take that object home, and you use it to make marshmallow chocolate over and over. Life is good. Right?"

"Very," said Edward.

Adam's eyes darkened. "But after a while, you die."

Edward looked shocked. "Why?"

"Because the object was deadly. But you didn't know that; you thought it only made marshmallow chocolate. You didn't know what it was or truly how to use it ... or even if you *should*. You knew only that right there at that second, it did something you liked, and wanted."

Eve nudged Edward's shoulder with her nose. "Or if you want a less morose example," she said, eyeing her husband, "let's say your marshmallow-chocolate-making object turns out to be like a plug in a lake's bottom. It makes marshmallow chocolate, but that's a side effect. Its purpose true is to keep the water in the lake, and when you pull it out, the lake runs dry."

"Regardless," said Adam, "you've found a thing that does something pleasant, but because you don't know what it really is or how to truly use it, you might be doing damage — to yourself or others — without realizing it, or meaning to."

"So the humans ... "

“To be dramatic,” said Adam, “they’re ‘toying with forces they can’t possibly understand.’ They’re drawn to white magic, same as we are, because the artifacts they find — living things, old vessels, gems and whatnot — make their plants grow or do other things that please them. That’s how it’s been from the beginning, since they first started clustering and gathering things that either we or the world’s magic left lying around. At first, it was just a novelty for them ... and, at the most, a vaguely annoying nuisance to us because we felt that only *we* deserved to use magic. The first I remember was when a human found a special rock, and he discovered that when he touched it to a stick when he was cold, the desire for warmth inside him caused the rock’s magic to light the stick on fire. It meant nothing to us at the time, but that one man learned to pile many sticks together to make a blaze to warm himself and his tribesmen. He told others, who found similar rocks. They learned to roast the animals they killed over the fire, and stopped succumbing to a host of diseases. Communities clustered around those able to make fire. They didn’t understand what they were doing, but they had discovered something amazing, and wanted more.”

“So what damage are they going to do to themselves or the world with magic rocks?” said Edward. “Other than set themselves on fire, I mean.” He laughed. The idea of humans on fire was hilarious.

“Nar any damage,” said Adam. “But that’s part of the problem. A few magic rocks wouldn’t matter. But what about when they learned to make fire using magic? What about when they learned to build with it? Do *those* things matter? Is there danger *there*? And again, at first, the answer was probably nar. And so it will continue, slowly, generation after generation. Humans are *fast*, Edward. In a thousand years, they might have fifty or more generations — enough to evolve their thought and societies to extents that we frankly, cannot hope to match — even with magic. Since the dawn of time, we’ve only had three generations of unicorns. We’re powerful, yar. We’re strong and smart, yar. But compared to them, we are monolithic and unchanging. We started out ahead of them. But they have it in them, with time, to surpass us.”

Edward rolled his eyes.

“Their speed of change is both their blessing and their curse,” Adam added. “They are friends with conflict. Unlike us, conflict brews with their every breath. So while they change fast, they don’t have time to assimilate

the wisdom that should accompany knowledge. They consumed and consumed and consumed the white magic. They swarmed on it like locusts. The world is still overflowing with magic, Edward, but I fear that may change if humans continue to grow unchecked. They don't know what they have at their disposal, and don't know what they're doing to the world."

"What are they doing?" said Edward.

"Remember what I said about the plug at the lake's bottom?" said Eve. "It's like that. They are collecting and using magic, but what's more is that they're *polarizing* it. Human use of magic in itself might not be a problem if they sampled light and dark equally, but they don't. They're like we were at the beginning. They want joy and paradise, but they don't want strife. They want ease without difficulty. The things they enjoy are powered by blissful white magic because it makes things easier and, by its mere proximity, makes them happier. It's hard to turn from good feelings. So they don't."

Edward looked toward the horizon's ramshackle buildings. He understood where his grappies were going, but humans were still an oddity. Unicorns outnumbered them at least fifty to one, and controlled most of the world's magic. Yar, the soil and the world held abundant enchantment, but it was nothing compared to what a unicorn controlled with his horn. Grappy was always dramatic, alternately telling tall tales and crusading for his version of saving the world — a world that, other unicorns keenly pointed out, Adam had helped to create and seemed in no danger. Grappy was an advocate of opening relations with humans, whereas most unicorns found the idea ridiculous and beneath them — no more beneficial or necessary than opening relations with horses. And Grammy? Grammy had been a pariah for as long as Edward had been alive — and, if he understood correctly, much longer. Both believed in trafficking with undesirables. Despite their prominence in Mead history, they would never have the support to lead. Allowing Adam and Eve to have their way would mean a Mead filled with Darkness and humans. And since the fabled tree incident (more myth than reality, most seemed to think), the unicorns, elves, and other light creatures had done their best to keep those elements out, to keep Mead pure.

"Do you understand, Edward?" said Adam. "It's vital that you do. Our time here has grown short, and at the most inopportune time. I fear a tipping point is at hand, and it will fall to your generation — foretold to either be the last or the penultimate generation of unicorns — to deal with it."

Edward sighed then kicked at the dirt.

“Do you understand?” Adam repeated.

“Sure,” said Edward.

Adam lowered his big white head and used his nose to nudge Edward’s gaze up from the dirt. “Don’t tell me what I want to hear, Edward. Yar, you are young. But you are old enough to say true what you think. I would rather you disagree with me than have my magic return to the Wellspring believing you felt true when you didn’t, especially about something so important.”

Edward looked from his grappy to his grammy, assessing their big, blue eyes.

“Say true, Edward,” said Eve.

Edward sighed, and began to say true.

“Well,” he said, “it’s just that I’ve heard what Shaman Marcus says to Ammy and Appy when he visits. And I’ve heard what the other grown unicorns say when they gather. And of course, I’ve heard it from the others my age, who — ” He paused, then surged on as he remembered his grappies’ entreaty to say true. “Who make fun of me for ‘the crazy things my grammy and grappy spout off about.’”

“Those unicorns don’t — ” Adam began, but Eve cut him off, urging Edward to finish speaking.

Edward paused, watching Adam resettle, then continued. “Anyway, they think there’s no danger and that you’re crazy to think there might be. They say there are a lot, lot, lot more unicorns than humans, and that there are even more elves than humans. They say that if we’re going to worry about something, it should be the trolls. Humans are soft and have no magic. My friend Cerberus says that if the humans ever became a problem, we could just march in and wipe them out, bat them away like insects, simple as that.”

Adam looked at Eve. Eve looked back and nodded toward Edward, waiting respectfully to see if he was finished. Edward decided he was, and said, “Anyway ... ”

“For a species as powerful as we are,” said Eve, her voice low and quiet, “unicorns are shockingly bad at seeing into the future. In that way, we’re a lot like humans. When the tree was growing larger and larger back in early Mead, nobody seemed to see that if we didn’t do something, its roots would sunder the world at its bedrock. The same is happening now.

You don't need to be magical or prophetic to see it. You need only look at the past."

"But I don't understand why it's a problem," said Edward. "Humans use magic. So what?"

Adam gestured with his nose toward the horizon, and the small town settled against it.

"They are splitting the magic, the same as happened at creation," said Adam. "Humans are — slowly, yar, but surely — creating their own paradise, just like we once had ours."

Edward watched his grappy, waiting to hear why it mattered.

"The question we must ask," Adam went on, "is this: As the humans build their paradise, what new and dark tree is beginning root inside it?"



CHAPTER 8

HOMEWARD

Edward said that he understood what his grappy was saying, even though he didn't. Humans were annoying and their horses were stupid, but they were just another tribe — another race of beings that the unicorns were content to ignore. Unicorns had, for as long as Edward knew, kept to themselves. They had their society, and they had their structure and routines. If they were threatened (which would be unwise for those doing the threatening) they were more than up to the task of defending themselves.

Trolls were trolls. Elves were elves. Plants were plants. And humans were humans. They'd do their thing, tinkering in their small, stupid way with magic, and the world would go on just fine.

The very air smelled of magic. It puffed out from under Edward's small hooves with his every step. The unicorns radiated magic like a fog. And as to the Darkness? There was plenty of that, too. There were still thorns around, even in Mead. Trolls lived just beyond the Mead borders, and sometimes rumbled as if planning to attack, though they never did. There were gargoyles and ghryst and ghoulern and other dark specters. Edward felt that his own life wasn't too easy (his appies mocked his inability to fly; the other colts and fillies mocked his horn; the entire society mocked his blood relation to Adam and Eve and their heresy), and that if the problem Grappy saw on the wind was a lack of conflict, then Edward felt sure he had it handled.

So he nodded respectfully to his grammy and grappy and took his leave, walking back across the meadows and through the tall grass. Forget-me-knots greeted him, seeming to nod. He could feel their beauty shining like a sparkle. He wondered how much of Grappy's story was true, and if Grappy had, indeed, had any hand in creating them. It was all stuff of legend, like the ancient grudge the whole of unicorn society seemed to still hold against Eve — not in a present way but in the way of a long-forgotten, never-resolved argument. Edward snickered at the idea of the two unicorns floating in the void, turning around and around for amusement. And with the thought, his mood brightened. He'd gone to Grammy and Grappy's to hear one of their stories, and today he'd heard a whopper.

But as Edward walked, he found himself remembering details of his visit — not of the story itself but of the way Grammy and Grappy had subtly supported each other's versions, filling in details without being asked. He thought of the dead-earnest way Grappy had asked if he understood, and the similarly dead-earnest way Grammy had compared the human settlement to the peach tree of legend.

He suddenly felt bad about having told Grammy and Grappy a lie. They would rather he be honest and disagree than speak untrue just to be on his way. Their words and what was behind them seemed to weigh tons.

He looked at the so-called Realm that was hardly a realm. The humans had put a wall around their town. Why? What could such a wall possibly stop? And what, pray tell, were they trying to hide behind it?

Grappy said that Edward's generation would need to extend relations with the humans. Unicorns needed to be present in the human settlement, he said, to act as shepherds. They needed to help the humans use their magic so they would use it correctly. *Why not simply forbid them to use magic?* Edward had asked, knowing that the unicorns, with the power they held, could easily enforce such a decree if they settled inside a human town. *Because WE need THEM, too,* Grammy had answered.

That was another thing that unsettled Edward as he walked — another thing he was sorry he'd lied about. Not only did Grappy want to "shepherd" the humans; he wanted to work with them — *as equals!* The notion raised Edward's mane. Humans were lesser beings. He'd heard many proposals about ways to *control* the humans from the minority of those who were actually concerned, but he'd never before heard anyone propose partnership. Yet Adam had been deadly serious, and as he'd looked his grappy in the eye, Edward suddenly understood why Adam was so ostracized. He'd always been an outspoken advocate of communing with humans. But teaming up with them? It was truly absurd.

Grappy said that unicorns were too proud to embrace the Darkness, even after everything Eve had shown them in early Mead. He said the world wasn't supposed to be pure light or pure dark. The world, he said, was supposed to be a shade of gray.

"The balance will always strive to be maintained, Edward," Grappy had said. "There are things that will have to be done that a unicorn can't do alone. We needed the peach tree, and the peach tree needed us. Only together could we birth conflict, only together move forward."

Edward had asked how that was possible. If Grappy wanted to “pollute” their white magic with Darkness, how could they do so now that the dark tree with its dark peaches was gone?

“Today,” Grappy told him, “partnering with humans gives us our peaches.”

At that point, the discussion grew too obtuse, and Edward started making excuses. He had games he wanted to play, and he needed to practice his flying.

His small wings were already tingling with magic. Tomorrow would be the day for sure— but with some practice, he might take flight tonight, in secret, then wow his appies in the morning.

He would show them.



CHAPTER 9

AN OCEAN OF DEATH AND DESPERATION

It was night by the time Edward departed.

His path from Adam and Eve's haven in the far valley was as long and winding on the way back as it had been when he'd set out that morning, nursing humiliation over his failed attempt at flying. It took him hours and hours to traverse it, but the world was filled with white magic and Edward was a unicorn, whether or not his horn was yet fully grown. There was nothing in the woods along the mountain path that could or would hurt him, so as he walked alone through the night, he was tireless and joyous and unafraid. His appies might be mad at him for leaving without telling them and for being gone so long, but they were jerks to him even in the best of times. They'd know he wasn't in any danger. What could happen? Would they be so lost without the hilarity of his failure?

The night was dark, with only the sliver of a moon. The forest was dense, and Edward could see only a hundred feet or so in any direction. He trusted the magic's whispers to tell him where he was, and that he was still on the long and winding road, slowly making his way home. He was in no hurry. Behind him was the troubling, almost sacrilegious thing his grammy and grappy had said was coming — and in the dark, the threat Grappy alluded to was harder to ignore. Ahead of him was his appies' ridicule, along with ridicule from other colts and fillies who never tired of making fun of his tiny wings and almost-nonexistent horn. The only true friend he had was Cerberus, who accepted Edward for who and what he was.

Thinking of this, Edward slowed. Why was he in such a rush to get home? Why did he care what his appies thought about where he'd gone and what he was doing?

He listened to the dark night, pausing to eat whatever plants and grasses he cared to. As he listened, Edward heard a great rushing from a nearby river, so hard and fast that the small unicorn thought the river must be catching melt from somewhere. He seemed to hear other things too, but the dark had a strange way of magnifying sounds, as it had a strange way of making your grammy and grappy's outlandish fears seem suddenly real.

Was a threat truly looming on the horizon? Were humans the *other halves* of unicorns that Grappy implied they were, as repugnant as the

notion might be? Did Grappy really want to try again sending unicorn emissaries into The Realm and other settlements? Did he really want to *partner* with them, and stay in their settlements as friends? Did he really want to help the humans' perversion of magic rather than stop them? And if Grappy did all of those things, how would Edward live it all down? He'd be kicked senseless by his peers, treated like an outcast even by the older unicorns.

Edward breathed deeply, listening to the strange, almost deafening rushing of water. He considered heading down to drink from the river, but something stopped him. Despite the promised safety of Mead's forest, he couldn't bring himself to veer from the path. Edward made his feet move faster. His desire to dawdle was diminishing. Nothing was fair, and nothing was easy. His grappies were going to make the whole family outcasts, and his appies were jerks. There was nothing to be done about any of it. He could at least be in his own home, with familiar grass under hoof.

A short time later, the sun started rising. Edward still couldn't see past the thick forest but could see light as it bled from between trees ahead. The tops were dusted with gold. Trunks stood out in the gloom — and then, as the sun rose farther, they seemed to sparkle. Edward made out more of the surrounding area. He looked behind himself and could see the familiar path winding through the S-curve that, only a few minutes earlier, he'd had to navigate mostly by feel.

He was still looking backward when he heard a squishing noise and felt his footing give out. He'd almost slipped forward onto his face when the hard-packed ground vanished beneath him, his hoof sinking into mud.

Edward looked ahead and saw that the path before him — a gradual downslope — was completely covered with water.

What he'd taken as ground ahead was actually a flat, liquid surface winding between and around all of the trees. The flooding was absolute. There was nothing ahead, on or off the path, that wouldn't amount to Edward having to ford water or swim through it.

Except that he couldn't swim.

Edward cocked his small white head, listening. The river. It had to be the river. *It* had overflowed and flooded the valley. But that wasn't right; he'd just looked back at that familiar S-curve in the trail. He knew the curve. He'd walked this path over and over and over again. The S-curve wasn't in the valley. It was near the peak of the high hills, right where the

high path finally started to descend. He wasn't near his meadow at all. He was still nearly an hour away.

Edward felt cold. He looked down and saw that both of his front hooves were covered to the fetlocks in water. He was sinking in the mud, so he stepped back, righting himself on the path. Then he looked back at the S-curve, trying to make sense of what had happened. He'd grown disoriented by the night and his troubling thoughts, concern for his elderly grappies, their health, their ideals, and the profane mission they seemed so intent to rest on his still rather narrow shoulders. How could he be near the hilltop? He was so confused. It must be a different S-curve.

Edward felt cold again and realized that, again, he was fetlock-deep. The floodwater was rising.

Still more confused than concerned, Edward stepped back again, refusing to believe what his senses and memory said. He was in the valley. He *had* to be. He *couldn't* be at the top of the hill. And how had there been this much water in the river to begin with?

What had flooded that river?

The river, he realized, that he'd been hearing for a long time now.

When the water again touched his hooves — this time the rear ones, as he'd turned around — Edward trotted up the hill. Just past the S-curve, a side trail led out to the edge of the woods, to a spot where his appies often paused to gaze out over the meadow valley. He ran through the curve, his nerve starting to falter, and turned onto the path. A minute later he was at the overlook, where breath nearly fell from his lungs.

The entire valley was flooded. Everything was gone. The place he lived with his appies — *gone*. The meadow where, just yesterday, he'd failed yet again to fly — *gone*.

Somewhere behind him, unseen in their valley, Adam and Eve's haven — *gone*.

Mead was an ocean. Only the tops of the highest hills still poked above the water, and those were being slowly eclipsed. Edward watched as the crest of a nearby hill (it was in the range he was walking, down and up from where he'd intended to go) vanished with a blip and a ripple. All around, Edward heard the rushing of water, including from behind.

The sky was packed with unicorns.

They circled like birds, seeming to take in the water. Even from this distance, watching the strange, four-legged hawks fly, Edward thought he

could read their mood. Unicorns were seldom surprised, but they seemed shocked plenty now. No one had seen this coming. Even now, they probably didn't know what had happened. There wasn't much rain. The rivers had been well within their banks just yesterday.

But wonder was eclipsed by a stronger emotion as Edward heard gurgling somewhere behind him. He stopped worrying, and became afraid.

He couldn't fly.

He couldn't swim.

He had almost no horn and was drastically, woefully unskilled in magic.

The other unicorns could fly, but he was going to die.

Edward searched the sky, panicked. His lack of a horn meant he couldn't call to the others. When whatever had happened began to unfold, his appies would surely have started to search for him. But where would they look? They'd probably assume he'd gone to Grammy and Grappy's, but Grammy and Grappy's haven would be gone by now. Would they think to search the path? And if they did, how would they find him? They wouldn't be able to home in on him; the forest was too rich with magic interference. The ocean of water was too large to ford other than in a very small area. They could lay waste to the trees so they could see him from above, but if they did that, they might also lay waste to their young, unskilled, vulnerable colt.

Just as Edward was starting to wonder if he could force himself to swim, a great white shape swooped down from behind him.

"Edward!" called a voice.

He looked up to see Appy, cupping his enormous wings as he hovered above. Ammy appeared beside him. Appy's horn glowed a dull red, and he felt himself flying skyward. Unicorns didn't normally ride unicorns, but Edward learned that rules were made to be broken as he settled on his back.

"Thank Providence," Jack said. "That's the only clear spot on the trail. I was hoping you'd be near enough and would remember it."

Edward tried to decide if he had, indeed, *remembered* the trail. He had, but hadn't sought it out as a means of saving himself. It was dumb luck.

Edward slipped to one side, and this time Diane's magic held him in place. The proposition was awkward at best, especially with Jack flapping, jostling Edward from side to side.

“I’m sorry, Edward,” he said, “but you’re going to have to ride like this for a while. I need my concentration to fly and my magic ready in case ... ” Then he stopped, letting the thought hang.

“Grammy and Grappy,” said Edward, thinking of Adam and Eve’s haven, its low location, and how, right now, he didn’t see the old unicorns with his appies. Grammy and Grappy had known where he was. When the valley started to fill, why hadn’t they flown up to find him?

“Gone,” said Jack. From where Edward sat unsteadily on his appy’s back with his ammy’s magic holding him down, the little unicorn thought he saw his father’s long face change, though he couldn’t be sure.

“Where?”

“*Gone*,” Diane repeated.

“But ... ”

“There will be time later, Edward,” Diane said. Edward saw something strange on her face, just like his appy’s. Edward thought of Adam returning his magic to the ground and speaking of the Wellspring. This would be the first time a unicorn had ever died. Edward wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He had no reference. But if the flood had risen quickly, he could believe it would have taken his grappies even with their magic and ability to heal. They’d looked so old when he’d left them, and they’d seemed so ready to leave. They had been alive since creation, and they’d been intentionally making themselves weak, preparing to go. Mayhap this wasn’t how they’d wanted to exit the world, but it seemed to have happened.

Edward tried asking more questions, but his appies would only supply him with cursory answers — most of them versions of “I don’t know.” After a while, Edward found himself surrendering questions in favor of awe. His lookout spot had vanished under water. He watched the same thing happen to several other peaks, the entire world from horizon to horizon slowly becoming nothing but sea.

Jack circled, and Edward lost his bearings. Where was his meadow? Where was that familiar line of hills? Where had the river been? And most of all, *what had happened?*

The unicorns continued to fly, surveying the waterworld like hornets searching for something to sting. Their horns glowed — whether magically searching, trying to fight the floodwaters, or held at the ready, Edward didn’t know. The unicorns were tireless. They could fly forever, or could magick rafts on which to stand. The other beings weren’t as lucky. The

three unicorns passed giant pieces of floating debris with non-flying beings clinging to them — elves, humans, and even helpless-looking trolls. Those who had survived fought for what they could grab to stay afloat. But many hadn't survived.

The three unicorns circled what was so recently Mead, two of them flapping their great wings and watching the sun rise on an ocean of death and desperation.



CHAPTER 10

YAR, GUNSLINGER

Clint looked at the adult version of Edward, standing just off his porch as worlds crumbled beyond. He warred with two emotions, only one appropriate. He felt bad for the colt in the story, and could almost feel his loss. On the other hand, it was hard to think about Edward as a bright-eyed youngster — with a tiny nubbin of a horn — without laughing. But more than either of those things, Clint wanted to know what happened next. Throughout their time together, Edward had treated the gunslinger as if he were on a need-to-know basis. Clint was over a hundred years old now (despite seeming much younger thanks to the power of the Triangulum Enchantem), and he'd been with his unicorn partner through most of that time. He'd have thought the time he'd put in would have earned him some respect — respect enough to at least not need to pry for information — but it never seemed to happen. Until now. Now he was hearing a story that humanity didn't remember, and one that made his time with Edward apparent for what it was: a grain in the sprawl of a unicorn's life.

"Why did the world flood?" Clint asked.

"I'll get to that."

"Because you stopped. You just kind of stopped like the story was over. Is the story over?"

"Yar, gunslinger," Edward said. "The story is over. I was a colt, I heard a story from my grappies, there was a flood. Then literally nothing happened until I met you. That's why the worlds splintered. That explains The Realm's prehistory in its entirety."

"Interesting," said Clint.

The unicorn shook his head. "In case you are too stupid to see it, I was pausing due to the moment's emotion. I haven't relived these stories in a very long time. They've been locked away within me. Because this was a very long time ago, and with enough time, even unicorn memories can change. For a race like yours, time will *erase* those memories. Only a handful of beings alive today would remember these times, and few would want to discuss them. It's why we created the line savants, who survived with their archival knowledge intact all the way to and through Emma and Sly Stone: to remember for us without being affected by the burden of time.

It's why those before us created the raconteurs: to tell the old stories with their cores intact, no matter how much your kind tried to distort them."

"Raconteurs?"

Edward looked away then back. "That's right; you don't know about the raconteurs. Or, for that matter, the stories. Don't worry. That's coming."

"How about you just explain now?"

Edward shook his head. Clint threw an empty apple brew bottle at him. Edward's reflexes were quick; his magic caught the bottle, inverted it, and shoved it under the back of Clint's belt. A trickling sensation at his rear told Clint that the bottle hadn't been entirely empty and that throwing it had been a mistake.

"I'm not being evasive," said Edward. "I'm being dramatic."

Clint looked at Edward. The unicorn looked every bit as stoic and uninterested as he always had. For a few decades, Edward had experienced a honeymoon of happiness and a return of the wide-eyed splendor possessed by the young Edward in the tale. The end of the world was a damper.

"You *look* dramatic."

"Thankoo."

"So why did the land flood? Did a dam break?"

"Something broke," said Edward. "But it wasn't a dam. It was the world itself. You know of the flood; you just don't know it as a flood. There is a reason you don't know all of the details, nor any human. You cannot be trusted."

"Thankoo for the lack of trust," said Clint, trying hard to control his bitterness. "But I don't know the flood at all."

"Yar, you do. You just know it as the Grand Cataclysm."

That got Clint's attention. His urge to joke vanished. He looked up, into Edward's big, blue eyes.

"I thought the Cataclysm shattered the worlds. You described it as 'the first end of the world.'" He looked out at his yard then nodded to where it abruptly ended and the black void began. "With, I suppose, this being the second end of the world. Let us hope there will be three strikes. Or at least that we can find the intact lands again before this giant commode flushes." He looked across the void at The Realm. Or what was left of it, anyway.

"It did shatter the worlds. It gave them a wound, and the flood was the first of it — a great sea dropping into Mead, scouring it clean. But the

damage was far beyond Mead. The borders thinned, like now.”

“What caused it?” Clint asked.

Edward sighed. “I will answer that,” he said, looking sad, “but first I need to tell you about the storm. About the other worlds. And about the stories we tell.”

Clint sat back, leaning on his straight arms.

“Then tell them.”



CHAPTER 11

THE STORM

They flew over Mead forever until it felt futile, almost foolish. It might have been days, though Edward, pressed tight to his appy's back by his ammy's magic, lost track of day and night's passage. Edward was terrified to shivers. Nothing seemed real, and a small part of his mind had convinced him it wasn't. After the floodwaters stopped rising, the world below seemed mostly featureless — an expanse of blue water and little else, other than dots of land here and there sticking up from the newly made sea. But sometimes Edward saw things that were fantastic, even to the young mind of a unicorn colt stranded in the air. Down seemed up, since both directions were blue. Sometimes it was dark below; sometimes only above. Once while half dozing, Edward thought he saw the world rip, as if it were a length of cloth, and saw the water fall into the void. As if in a haze, Edward watched it and thought, *Good. Now the water can drain away.* Then he fell asleep.

Perhaps it was Diane's tireless magic on his back that caused his hallucinations. The sun rose and set, strangely unconcerned with Mead's transformation. Edward saw a team of soldiers wearing armor bedecked with hearts and strange black clovers marching by as if on the water's surface, then vanish like a mirage. He saw a single rowboat, piloted by a lone human man with wild hair under an enormous hat and a strangely cut suit of human clothing, pass by beneath them, cackling, then stared as the man steered his boat toward a sort of phantom whirlpool as if it weren't there. A moment later, it wasn't, and neither was the strange human.

Edward didn't fight the visions. It was more comfortable to believe the world was what it couldn't be — that it was actually ripping and tearing and crumpling and becoming populated by strange, impervious beings — than to believe what seemed to be the truth: that everything unable to fly or float was dead.

For days, they watched, circled and found nothing. Edward tried to sleep or disbelieve his eyes, no matter what they said. Mead wasn't what it had been. Grammy and Grappy were gone, having decided to die before their time for reasons Edward had almost understood, but which now made no sense whatsoever. Nobody should die. No *unicorn* should die. But it

wasn't just Grammy and Grappy who had perished in the flood. Edward knew plenty of other foals who couldn't swim, or yet fly, and whose horns were too small to effectively magick their safety. They couldn't all have been saved so serendipitously by their appies. Edward couldn't figure their odds and didn't want to ponder. Adept fliers like Cerberus would be fine, at least until their strength eventually surrendered. How long, he wondered, could a unicorn stay aloft?

His appies seemed tireless but were clearly using all the magic and energy they had. When Edward tried speaking — perhaps to ask them if the city of light below was real or just another phantasm — they shook him off. Their eyes were down. But after enough time, he began to feel about them the way Edward felt about himself and all of the other unicorns who continued to circle: They didn't know any more than he did, and were just as scared and confused as he was. Mead had an order and a hierarchy, as much as everyone denied it, and unicorns were the kings. The elves and trolls and humans could pretend to be independent and autonomous, but in the end, the unicorns were law. They weren't used to living without direction. They weren't used to contending with things they didn't understand because nothing was supposed to happen without their blessing.

Mayhap Adam and Eve could have explained the flood. But Adam and Eve, so far as Edward could ascertain from his tight-lipped, concentrating appies who were trying to hold themselves together, were gone.

After somewhere between five and seven days, Jack said, "I'm no longer convinced this is Mead below us."

Diane looked over.

"There are still unicorns in the sky, but the wind has been building from the sunset horizon, and we've gone days with no points of reference. We could be anywhere."

"Appy," Edward said, feeling Diane's magic hand pressing him flat, "how long can you fly?"

"As long as I need to."

"Is this our life from here on?" The thought was depressing. He'd rather Appy couldn't fly anymore and they'd simply fall into the water and die. He could never even learn to fly if he grew up in this terrible, unending limbo because he'd never be able to practice. Their legs would forget the trick of walking. Even if it was possible to fly forever, who would want to? Wouldn't it be like trying to hold onto an idea whose time had faded? He'd

rather just go where Grappy and Grammy had gone: back to the Wellspring, which, these days, the young unicorn swore he could see in front of his eyes.

“No,” said Diane. “Of course not.”

“I don’t know,” said Jack at the same time. Then they looked at each other, realizing perhaps that they should synchronize their stories.

“What happened to cause this?”

“I don’t know that either, Edward. As I’ve told you.”

“You haven’t told me anything.” He tried to sit or stand and failed.

“You just keep telling me to be quiet.”

“I need my magic ready. For when ... ”

“For what? What is here to threaten us?”

“Edward ... ” Diane began. On his back, the giant magic hand seemed to soften.

“Can’t we magick a raft?”

“From what, Edward?” said Jack. His appy’s voice was somewhere between irritated and sad. Edward had the terrifying thought that Appy felt just as hopeless as he did, but was trying to believe in a nonexistent future simply for Edward’s benefit. “There are no materials.”

“Make the materials. Make a boat.”

Diane answered, her voice tender beside him. “You’re not thinking. You know we cannot make something from nothing. No one can.”

“Grammy and Grappy told me *they* created ... ”

“Your grappies had a lot of stories,” said Jack.

“He means that they worked through Providence,” said Diane.

Jack didn’t respond, but Edward got the distinct impression that it wasn’t what Appy had meant at all. He was angry with the flood, and with Adam and Eve for leaving them. The first unicorns had insights — however mocked and fought by the others — that the younger ones didn’t (couldn’t?) understand. They were never surprised by things that shocked others. And yet, they were always concerned by things that bothered no one else. Like humans.

Edward peered down, past his appy’s great white back, and looked at the never-ending blue below. The wind was stirring from the sunset horizon again. The water’s surface was starting to ripple. The wind had, so far, seemed to come in regular cycles that grew stronger the longer it blew. Were there humans below, in boats made for the river? And if so, could they

survive? Or were Grappy's concerns solved entirely when they'd lost their city?

Had they lost their city? Edward hadn't thought about that before.

He had assumed the Realm was destroyed, same as Adam and Eve's haven. But then he thought of what Grappy had said about the disproportionate human use of white magic — and about how Grappy was afraid that the humans would one day become developed enough to outthink even the unicorns themselves.

"So if it's not Mead below," Edward said, "what's next?"

Jack sighed and for the third time said, "I don't know. We can survive up here for plenty longer, but I'm tired. I want somewhere to stand, a place to rest and graze. I've been communicating with the others. Slowly we're starting to agree: Whatever we're waiting to show itself as the source of this horror — whatever we're angry with, and wish to punish as if our anger will return our home and raise our dead — will not show. We are fools, chasing what is gone. Pretending it's possible to rewind time and reclaim our lives. Mayhap the waters will recede, and Mead — such as it remains — will be returned to us. But we cannot make it happen by force of will, no matter how long we circle and remain angry like stirred hornets."

"You want to move on," said Edward. "Look for land."

"Yar," said Diane. Edward realized that for the first time, they were actively moving. The wind from the sunset horizon didn't just seem stronger; part of what he felt was the wind of passage, as they steered toward it.

"Where are we going?"

"There are mountains in this direction. I can no longer tell how high the waters have risen, but mayhap there's solid ground waiting."

Edward looked ahead, noticing dark clouds smudging the distance. Wind was pouring from them. As wind came in waves over the past days, Edward had gotten the distinct feeling of something trying to break through. Now, looking into the clouds, he found himself growing nervous for a reason he couldn't quite fathom.

"Those clouds," said Edward.

"Yar," said Jack. "There are clouds ahead."

Edward wasn't thinking of clouds. He was thinking of something Grappy had once told him long ago, during one of his fantastic stories. He'd spoken of something called a *storm*. Edward had never experienced a storm,

and, if Grappy was to be believed, neither had any living unicorn. Even Grappy treated the subject like an ancient myth, but looking back, Edward found himself with new context. He thought of the tree, and of Eve piercing the veil between dark and light by eating the tree's peach, and thus equalizing the pressure. The storm from Grappy's storybook (it was depicted as a horrifying triangular thing that twisted from sky to ground like a writhing snake) existed, Grappy had said, in order to equalize differences in the air that had never existed in such polar opposites in Mead. Grammy, Edward remembered, had found this ominous, almost as if she wished Mead had storms of its own — one more way the world should be eating its peaches and reveling in the disorder it caused.

Edward had plenty of time to think on what Adam and Eve had said while they'd been flying, and thought he was starting to understand about balance and the value of conflict and the dark. But the clouds ahead were flashing as if with some interior magic, and Edward felt like a brand-new foal.

"It looks like a storm."

"Don't be ridiculous, Edward," said Jack. At the same time, Edward thought he saw something flicker in his ammy's big, blue eyes, as if a long-dormant idea had reasserted itself.

"It *could* be a storm," she said.

"There has never been a storm. It's a thing of legends and tall tales."

Diane argued, "There has never been a flood, either."

Jack shook his head. His mane danced. He seemed to accelerate, leaving Ammy a few wingstrokes behind.

They flew on. Clouds continued to darken. Light bled from the world too fast. Sunset hid behind billowing black clouds, and the absence of an evening sun made the clouds that much darker. Edward shook. His breathing quickened. The wind grew stronger, and Edward, both looking forward at his appy and sideways at his ammy, felt as if they were traveling at insane speeds. Around them, the great white winged birds, tinged gray by the over-rapid twilight, soldiered on, just as fearless.

Edward felt sure the clouds were getting darker, but Jack wouldn't hear it. Night was coming; the clouds were merely bled of their color by the sun's departure. But Edward's mind kept flashing back to Grappy Adam's story and his storybook with its vivid, terrifying pictures. A book of fantastical tales adults read to foals so they could teach them moral lessons,

but neither Grammy nor Grappy (who'd grown up with their fair share of the fantastical) ever seemed willing to dismiss the book's events. Edward had pointed out the horrible storm (in the story, people went *through* it into another world, but only after enduring horrors) and had said — not asked — that such a thing could never exist in Mead. But his grappies hadn't validated his skepticism, and said something he couldn't forget: "Almost anything can exist if we allow it."

Older unicorns were supposed to soothe foals when they hurt themselves, telling pretty stories while pain endured and healing occurred. On the rare occasions when older unicorns worried, they were supposed to tell foals there was nothing to worry about. For foals, life was supposed to be pretty, perfect, and nothing else — but still, neither Adam nor Eve would ever talk down Edward's fears. They seemed determined that he know the world's true nature as they saw it, with all its thorns.

And, apparently, anything else that was allowed to exist.

Edward seemed to see a flash of light from behind him. Moments later, strange sounds tore through the blooming night. A horrible racket — the din of a world splitting apart.

"What was that?" said Edward.

"The sound of us approaching the mountains," Jack said. Around them, hundreds of unicorns had gathered. Edward didn't think there were more unicorns now than there had been in recent days, but they'd come much closer. Perhaps out of fear for something they, even as kings of all creation, no longer understood.

"It was thunder," Edward said.

Jack chanced a look back. Edward barely got a flash of his appy's eye but saw enough to know he was angry. Only he wasn't just *angry*. He was furious.

"Sit still, and shut your flapping lips!" he bellowed over the growing wind. "Unless you want to be in charge, I'll hear no more about your grappy's superstitious manure!"

Edward cowered, lying lower even than Diane's magic pressed him. He felt moisture in the air, then rain. But it wasn't pleasant rain like they knew back in old Mead; it was a foreign, angry sort. It came at them sideways and shifted with the wind's whim. Appy, Edward realized with horror, was frightened. That's why he was so angry. Unicorns weren't used to uncertainty; they were masters of all and victims of none. But it was too late

to turn back, out of the non-storm and away from the non-thunder. The winds had grown fiercer, and the thunder — it *was* thunder, and the flashes were lightning; Edward was sure but wouldn't repeat it — had them surrounded.

They had nowhere to land, or to take shelter. Nowhere to rest. And no way out.

A gust knocked Diane back. Edward felt her magic hold falter a moment, then quickly recover. She pumped forward, arriving as close to Jack and Edward as their large flapping wings would allow.

"Hold tight, Edward!" she yelled.

It was absurd; he was a foal balanced on a thrumming back. He didn't have a human's hands to clasp Appy's neck. He didn't have a human's outward-rotating hips to grip his appy's heaving sides. He couldn't weave his fingers through his appy's mane because he had none. For the first time, Edward envied that lesser species, and thought how secure and right it must feel to mold your body to another, stronger and more powerful than your own.

There was a flash to their right, and a giant fork of white light shot toward the unseen ground below. It stole Edward's breath; he closed his eyes and violently shivered. Lightning gave the air a distinct tang as it passed and left the scent of something burned. In Grappy's stories, lightning struck trees. Was it possible there were trees below? He couldn't see. Up, down, right, left, forward, and back — all the same and churning masses of black menace. Thunder boomed. Lightning flashed. Jack was rocked on his wings, and Edward slid, helpless. Eve's magic hand held him tight, but the rain made Jack's back slick, and the friction was waning. Even the magic hand's pressure didn't seem like enough, less steady than ever.

"*We have to go back!*" Diane yelled. Her voice was nearly lost to the wind, wicked away in a spout of updraft.

"There's nowhere to go." Jack said it plainly, and Edward doubted Ammy could even hear. Edward knew his appy well enough to imagine his face as he said it. His lips would be set tight; his eyes would be forward-facing (as much as was possible for a unicorn, anyway) and steely. Jack couldn't make the storm stop, and could no longer correct his stubborn insistence to charge it. The only way out was through. They might make it and they might not, but Jack's face would show no fear. It was all he could do to remain confident for the others — the others who had followed the

lead of Adam's son because Adam and Eve had been the only two who might, in some small way, have understood what was happening.

They couldn't go back. The storm was all around them.

"What are we going to do, Appy?" Edward shouted over the wind.

"We are going to fly, Edward. We are going to reach the mountains. Then we are going to find shelter and rest, and wait this out."

Edward knew his appy was making it all up. He had no reason to believe they were anywhere near the mountains, or that the tips still rose above the floodwaters. But pessimism wouldn't help and optimism couldn't hurt, so Appy was saying what Edward wanted to hear. And despite everything, he found himself somewhat comforted. Edward's appy, despite their sometimes-acrimonious relationship, had always done his best. Mayhap he could do that now, when it mattered most.

On the other side of Edward's mind, he wondered if the storm *could* be waited out. Storms were things of legend, but in legend, they were giant equalizers, righting a fault in the world to balance opposites, the same as Eve's eating the peach of the dark tree had allowed magics to mix and create an in-between species of gray. But what had gone wrong with the world this time? How long would it take for a storm to equalize the trauma it seemed to have sustained?

They struck a brick of wind so hard it felt like running into a tree. Edward was briefly airborne, before Diane could push him back down. Then they hit another, and the hand on Edward's back faltered again. It was back just in time. The world below was a tempest of swirling fury. Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. Edward's heart echoed in his chest. His mind tried checking out, to slip into panic's escape. But he kept himself focused, feeling that if the other unicorns had to remain present, he should too.

But then they struck another invisible wall, and this time he left Jack's back for good. He felt Diane's magic hand try to grab him, but once he was aloft the wind caught his chest flat, and he flew back behind his appies' streamlined, flapping bodies. It happened so fast that there was no chance to recover; he saw Diane and felt her reach out, but then there was only blackness. The wind was too intense; it sat below him like a pillow. He wasn't falling. He was moving up, and sideways. Then, as the air pillow threatened surrender, Edward saw something that killed his breathing.

It was right out of Grappy's storybook.

The storm had taken on a corporeal shape. He could only see it when the lightning flashed, but it was *right there* — right in the middle, like a garden's fountain. The storm's focus was a giant funnel: wide at the top and narrowing as it descended. The thing was wild and angry, seeming to roar like a wounded beast. Between lightning flashes, he could feel it, dimly aware that he wasn't precisely falling but was instead beginning to orbit, falling toward it. When lightning flashed and thunder boomed, Edward saw it in all its horror, sneaking near in the darkness. With each flash it drew closer, its churning, semi-liquid sides like a wall.

He might only have watched the storm's funnel-shaped cloud approach for two or three seconds. For Edward, it seemed to be an eternity.

Then, feeling the air sucked from his lungs, the unicorn was pulled into the storm to become one with its rage and destruction.



CHAPTER 12

ALL ALONE

Edward woke up.

He was on a rocky outcropping. After so long in the air, the ground against his side felt very strange, and for a long moment the unicorn didn't know where he was. He forgot the flood, forgot the storm, forgot his appies and his grappies and all the other unicorns. His mind seemed to reset as he blinked at the rocks around him, finding them painted with dried colors like weaver's pigment. He realized he was looking at his own blood. He stood, shaking himself out, and found his side covered in the same hues. He must have smashed into the outcropping very hard — but then because he was a unicorn, he'd healed.

The reset continued. He looked around, dispassionate and neutral. Part of him wanted to blank the past, to see his situation exactly as it was and nothing beyond that.

In the distance, he could see a great lake. Only it wasn't a lake, he realized; it was more like an ocean. It stretched as far as his eyes could see. And, as he turned, could see it covered three-quarters of his view. Behind him was the rock, and it stretched back some unknown distance (and went up as it did, he noticed), but the rest was water. It was so calm he could see ripples when something fell — dropped by birds, speared by insects.

The flood. Edward remembered the flood.

It was like coming back from a long dream. He recalled entering the churning storm. He remembered days spent above a vast flood. He turned, now feeling himself whole, and realized that he'd made the mountains after all. Only, they weren't as his appy had described. Behind him was an expanse of grass, but the grass was somehow different from Mead grass. There were clouds circling the mountain farther up, but they had a dull red hue, as if lit by the morning sun from within. The air smelled strange, and carried a taste. And in the distance there was ... *singing*? Edward couldn't be sure.

He turned from the mountain to the flood. He wondered if the waters had receded, then looked around and realized that nothing low to the water was wet. So the waters hadn't moved after all. He looked back at the mountains and could hear that strange sound. There was a road not far off,

and it wound around the cliffside toward something unseen. There was a glow — vaguely colored — coming from that direction.

He blinked and realized there was nothing. Not even a road. The mountain was barren, but still somehow foreign.

He remembered the others, and remembered his appies.

Had they made the mountains? *Was* this even the mountains? It had to be, so Edward approached the road that was never actually there, prepared to scout and find some of the others. It took him a short time to circuit the mountain's remaining height, finding it much smaller than he'd hoped. He'd climbed to the summit, feeling like a mountain goat, and found it quite close. Then he did it again, this time twice as slowly, seeking nooks and crannies, anywhere winged unicorns might hide. There was nothing on the mountain — basically now just a small, rocky island — other than him. Whatever Edward had sensed originally — a road, the sounds of singing, a pinkish haze in the clouds, the feeling of a storybook city just around the corner — had never been there. He was alone.

He looked up. The sky was clear and blue and beautiful, devoid of the giant white forms of flying unicorns. From each side of the mountain/island, Edward could see the flat horizon in the distance. There were no other mountaintops. No other islands. Looking up, there were no unicorns in the sky.

Edward lay down and waited. He remembered his time on the hill trail's peak, and how his appies had saved him from rising floodwaters. Mayhap if he waited, that would happen again. Edward's odds of coming to rest on the only land in sight were slim (impossible, really), but his appies would be certain to search. Well, if they were alive, anyway. If they hadn't been smashed into the water and held under until even the mighty unicorns, weakened and drained after their time in the air, were drowned.

He couldn't think about that now.

The unicorn lay on the not-quite-right grass, wondering if he'd ever return to the world he'd once known. This wasn't that world; that much was certain. This was a world of water and rocks — and, come to think of it, he was plenty grateful for the rocks. This was a world of mixing dark and light, of storms, lightning, and thunder. Strangely, the idea that a storm might strike again (not soon, though; the air was as clear and empty of clouds as he'd ever seen it) didn't bother Edward at all. The storms might come. He didn't know if there were any places on his island to hide. But it didn't

matter; it would either happen or it wouldn't, and there was nothing he could do about it either way.

He fell asleep.

Sometime later, he awoke. Edward felt that he'd been shaken awake rather than simply stirring on his own, and searched for the source of the disturbance. He turned, realizing that there was a large wooden ship not too far off, and that someone on board was playing a horn of some sort. The horn was intermittent, blurring out trumpet calls as if the musician were angry or indignant.

Edward paced toward the boat, curious. Whatever it was, there was something alive onboard. There had to be someone piloting the thing, and right now the unicorn wanted nothing more than to see signs that something else was still around, that something else had found itself with hooves on solid ground.

As it pulled closer, Edward took in the boat from front to rear. It was crude but apparently seaworthy — more elaborate than any river boat he'd ever seen. And with that thought, he found himself wondering where the strange craft had come from. Edward didn't know of any bodies of water large enough to merit a ship like the one in front of him, other than the body of water it was floating on now. He'd heard there were areas far from Mead with endless lakes known as oceans, but had it really come that far? Or had *he* really *gone* that far? The unicorn realized that if he were, in fact, at the mountains that his appy had told him about (and he was in no way sure that he was), *he* might be the one out of place.

Looking at the boat and listening to the same trumpeting noise, Edward didn't think that was right. This boat was ideally — almost prophetically — suited for the world as it had become. It was large enough to be a floating dwelling, not a mere source of transportation. But why would such a thing exist?

And it stank. As the boat drew closer, Edward could see windows along its length. Soon, his good unicorn eyes identified things in the windows. Things that didn't make sense.

He saw an eylifant, which was the thing making the trumpeting. Was the elephant the driver? That would be disappointing.

He saw the long, spotted neck of a giraffe popping out from one of the windows.

And on deck, in a sort of cage, he saw a platybeaver. That last was strange. Couldn't a platybeaver survive in a waterworld? Whoever had captured it seemed intent to keep it like a collector.

As Edward catalogued the animals, he heard a shout from the boat's other end.

"Oh, all right!" shouted a crazed-looking man wearing a robe and an enormous white beard. "Now at least I've got one of you!"



CHAPTER 13

NOAH AND THE ARK

The human seemed shocked to hear Edward speak. It was as if he'd never met a unicorn — or worse: that he'd never even heard of one.

When Edward said his first phrase to the man ("Your boat stinks"), the man reacted with shock. But his shock didn't last long. The man blinked, then shrugged as if deciding that the world had gone topsy-turvy and that if things wanted to talk that he didn't think should, he was willing to roll with the perfectly unreasonable. After that, he introduced himself, reaching a hand toward Edward. The unicorn looked at the man's hand.

He looked down, laughed, and dropped his hand. "I'm Noah."

"Edward."

"No offense, Edward," said Noah, "but I've never met a talking horse."

Edward made a face. "I'm a unicorn."

"I thought unicorns had horns?"

Edward waved his stump, suddenly convinced that it was a long and mighty horn of keratin and that Noah was just blind. He resisted the urge to say that he hadn't hit his growth spurt yet and that it would come in time. But Noah didn't look toward his nubbin; he just saw Edward's big head shake and, apparently, thought he was shaking his head in negation.

"No? Okay, fine. And I guess I see wings. Well, whatever. Come on in. I don't have one of you, either." Then he mumbled, "Why is it so hard to find a horse?"

He waved, and Edward realized that the man expected him to fly onto the boat. The move was presumptuous. For one, Edward didn't want to get onto the man's boat. Second, he wanted to wait for his appies to arrive. And third, he couldn't fly — and right now, more than anything, Edward didn't want to admit to this crazy white-bearded human that he couldn't do what the man seemed to assume that he could. Unicorns were supposed to be mighty and fearsome; Edward would have to establish his dominance over the man before he could get onto his reeking boat — which, again, he definitely wouldn't do.

Except that Noah and his captive animals were literally the only living things he'd seen since waking, and the clear sky held no signs of unicorns.

Edward looked the boat over from end to end, smelling its ripe, confined odor. He looked at Noah and saw very large, very wide blue eyes — not unlike a unicorn's — staring back at him with some insane breed of expectation. The man was out of his mind. The end had come, and he was rowing across creation in a boat, collecting animals.

Edward looked around his little island, noticing the not-quite-right grass, the not-quite-right smell on the air (beyond the scent of Noah and his passengers) and the not-quite-right taste settling on the back of his tongue. He recalled the things he'd seemed to see when he'd been flying, and the things he'd seemed to see when first arriving on his rock. Edward was suddenly certain that he'd come farther than he thought. Something was wrong. The animals were wrong. Edward had been watching the windows for a while and had seen animals he didn't recognize. And he hadn't seen so many of the animals and beings that he probably should have. Why were there no elves? No trolls? If the man was a collector, wouldn't he want to collect some of everything?

Edward felt a sudden certainty that Noah's might be the only voice he'd ever hear again.

"If I do you the favor of coming onto your stinking boat," Edward said, trying to channel Appy's inner jerk, "I won't let you stick me down with all those crappers." He tossed his head toward the other animals.

"Okay."

"And I want to stay up on the deck, so I can watch the sky for other unicorns."

Noah looked up, excited. "There are others?"

"Of course. And they are mighty. If they wanted, they could sink your pathetic little boat."

Edward met Noah's eyes, wondering if he'd pushed too far. He wasn't used to humans — in fact, he'd never seen one so close — but a being was a being, and he thought he could read the man enough to see that taking Edward was a gesture of charity. Yar, he clearly wanted to collect him. But it seemed as if he wanted to save Edward too, and threats were seldom an appropriate way to thank saviors.

"Cool," said Noah.

The issue seemed to be settled — Edward having established his own awesomeness and Noah having accepted some unspoken species of thanks — but Edward still didn't want to reveal that he couldn't fly. If Noah knew

he couldn't fly, he might realize Edward could barely do any magic — although that same itchy feeling inside the unicorn said that Noah really *had* never seen anything like him before, and he might not know that magic was expected.

"I don't want to fly though this air," Edward said, flapping his wings self-importantly. "It's ripe with stench."

"Yeah, it sure is," Noah agreed. Without argument, he reached down with a long oar and, after a few minutes, urged the boat closer. He waggled to the edge and began to extend a dangerous-looking wooden plank. Edward, who was still smaller than most of Noah's animals, doubted he could cross the thing without cracking it. But it was either that or be carried over in a net.

"Stand back," said Edward.

Noah, nonplussed, did.

Edward approached and then, with a final glance at the air and at the rocky island behind him, carefully crossed the rickety bridge, suspecting that he might be being stupid. There was something wrong with a man who traveled around and collected animals for his amusement, and the rocky mountaintop, though small and uninteresting, was at least terra firma. But Noah was at least someone with words in a world where such things seemed suddenly scarce, and Edward had to admit he didn't know if the floodwaters were done rising or not. If he let Noah leave and then his mountain vanished (it wasn't terribly tall, after all), he'd be sunk. Literally.

"So," said Noah once Edward had crossed, pulling back his dogpatch bridge, "you're a unicorn."

"Yar."

"Well, I don't have any unicorns. I saw some things that looked like they might be unicorns, but it's been a very long trip and I think I might be seeing things. I also thought I saw some mermaids a while back, but they turned out to be manatees. I tried to net them and pull them over the side, but apparently they weigh, like, as much as a hippo. So I just got wet and had to get fished out by my wife."

Edward looked around. The boat smelled even more now that he was on it. The boards were all old, but the nails holding the thing together looked new. It was as if Noah had taken a pile of refuse and decided recently to turn it into a floating zoo. Now that Edward was on board, he could see several humans milling about. The animals were all in some sort of a hold,

at the bottom of a wide descending walkway that curved from where he stood. They were all making their various animal noises. Edward wondered if it was too late to swim for it.

“What is a manatee?”

“Sea cow,” said Noah.

“What’s that?”

“You know, like a cow. Except in the sea. And not like a cow at all.”

Edward didn’t know what a cow was. Or, for that matter a hippo. But admitting his ignorance to Noah would surrender control of their conversation to an unkempt human, so the unicorn kept it to himself. Noah was clearly not used to speaking with anything other than humans, but was adjusting well.

“How long have you been on this boat?”

“Since the storm began.”

“Oh, I thought it had been longer.” Edward didn’t add what he wanted to: *Were you always crazy?* Edward assumed a long boat journey had caused the man’s mind to crumble. As Edward was politely shelving the question (and as he hated himself a little for being polite to a *human*), Noah’s face exploded in animation — bright blue eyes bugged farther from his mad bush of white hair, mustache, and beard.

“Longer!” said Noah. “How long do you think it should be? That was the longest storm I’ve ever seen! It lasted for forty days and forty nights!”

“Forty-one nights,” said a dirty woman emerging from below. “It started at night, Noah.”

“It did not, woman!” Noah yelled back. The woman didn’t appear to hear. Instead, she vanished into the animal hold carrying two canvas bags loaded with something that chattered like dry grain. The exchange gave Edward the idea that the question of when the storm started was a source of contention on the boat and a frequent topic of debate.

Noah looked at Edward. “Forty days and forty nights,” he repeated. “We sailed just as the waters were starting to rise.”

Edward looked up. The ship had no sails — which, Edward knew from Grappy’s stories, were the only way boats could move unless teams of humans were rowing. Edward had seen only a handful of oars, and the boat had nothing above.

“Fine,” said Noah, following Edward’s gaze. “We *floated* just as the waters started to rise. I didn’t know I was supposed to make sails. The voice

said to build an ark, so I built an ark, and I never got the idea they had sails, so yeah, we just sort of float around. You have a problem with that? Because you can go back, you know.” This seemed to be a sore issue, so Edward let it go and said nothing. Finally Noah broke his gaze and muttered ill-naturedly. “I had to ask around to find out what an ark was, you know. The voice couldn’t have said ‘boat’? I was halfway into building one of these.” Noah made an arch shape in the air. “I’m glad I asked. Boy would I have been surprised when the storm started if all I’d had was a large wooden U.”

Hearing Noah speak of a voice, Edward found himself recalling Grappy’s story about the beginning of everything.

“Who told you to build a boat?”

“Ark.”

“Fine, an *ark*. ”

“I just heard this voice. It said, ‘Build an ark, Noah.’ At the time, I was trying to start a sheep farm, along with a few other little ventures. I had my hands full. There was no way I wanted to build a boat. Or an ark, as I saw it. *What practical value would an ark be?* I wondered. But it just kept *nagging* and *nagging* so eventually I said ‘FINE!’ and started building just to shut the voice up. Everyone thought I was crazy. You should have heard Eric the Shepherd and how he made fun of me to the town lasses. The joke was on Eric. He died on the storm’s first day, and I took two of his sheep for the ark!”

“Why did you take sheep?”

“Well, I’d been working on that for a while. The voice had said to take two of each animal. And you know, I did my best!” He glared at Edward, and again the unicorn got the impression that this was a sore topic. “I got two sheep, and that was fine. I’ve giraffes down there, and even elephants — and YES, THE BOAT HELD!” Noah yelled this last bit at nobody in particular, seeming to feel the need to win an argument. “But I also grabbed two griffins and a pair of villionborers, but it wasn’t until I was out here that I realized the idea was probably supposed to be for me to get ONE OF EACH GENDER, THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR LETTING ME KNOW.”

Noah looked up, as if yelling at the cloudless sky.

“So those animals are going to have a hard time, I guess, unless they get creative. But do you have any idea how hard it is to collect two of EVERY

ANIMAL?” Again Noah looked up, annoyed at something Edward couldn’t see. “There are too many animals. Was I supposed to get grubs and worms? What about mosquitoes? They can fly. But would they die without any land? And did I care? I hate mosquitoes! But the voice didn’t help me out once I started building — it seems reactive rather than proactive, nagging me only when I do something wrong rather than GIVING A GUY A WORD OF THANKS FOR DOING AS HE’S TOLD, THANK YOU — so I figured I’d better get mosquitoes. Got plenty in a jar. Disgusting. I had to get wasps, slugs, leeches, tapeworms ... ”

Noah continued to list disgusting animals. Most were a mystery to Edward. And he still wasn’t mentioning creatures the unicorn knew, many of which were sentient. Based on Noah’s speech, humans were the only things on the boat with any brains. And not much at that, Edward thought. Apparently, this crazy old man had an impulse, then had run around his town collecting animals in pairs. The other humans must have been baffled.

“I couldn’t get them all before the flood started, so when it did and I started to get bored — forty days and forty nights of rain is a long time to ... ”

“Forty-one,” said the woman, emerging from the hold with the same two bags, now empty.

“Forty, WOMAN!”

The woman made a dismissive gesture and vanished.

“Anyway,” said Noah, distracted, “it’s a long time to sit on an ark and look at water. So I made a game, trying to find the animals I didn’t have. It’s been hit or miss. I think there might be millions. Frankly, I’m hoping a bunch survived on an island somewhere, or that there will be a way, after this flood is over, for the animals I have to adapt and change into other animals over long periods of time.”

“That’s ludicrous,” Edward said.

“Yeah, well, a lot of this is ludicrous,” said Noah, walking to the ark's edge and looking out across the endless sea. Edward was behind him, but the ark's side was low enough to reach his head over, so he stood beside Noah, wondering if this would be his only companion for the rest of the human’s life. The thought was depressing.

“You said the storm lasted for forty days and forty nights.”

Noah glanced at the closed door where the dirty woman had disappeared. “Yes.”

“We didn’t see the storm until last night. We only saw the flood.”

“You didn’t even get forty days and forty nights of rain?”

Edward said, “No.”

“How could there be a flood without rain?”

That had been one of Edward’s many questions, but he had no answer.

“You know,” Noah added, “I’ve never seen a real unicorn.”

Something wasn’t adding up. How could a human never have seen a unicorn? Unicorns were everywhere, and they were constantly fiddling in human affairs — not diplomatically as Grappy suggested, but from afar, as a vague threat.

“Are you from the Realm?” Edward asked.

“What’s the Realm?”

Edward didn’t answer. He backed away from the side, disheartened by the open water. The boat was disgusting, Noah was crazy, his wife (if that’s who she was) seemed argumentative. The humans didn’t even have the proper context required to fear or respect him. As far as Noah was concerned, Edward was a talking horse.

The boat’s slow rocking as it bobbed along (aimless, without a sail or regularly working oars, apparently) made Edward unsteady, so he lay down on the deck. Two human men passed with curious glances. If Edward had to guess, they were probably wondering why he wasn’t below with the other stinking cargo.

“Noah,” said Edward. He hated how it sounded as the word flew from his mouth. He’d begun their short acquaintance by assuming an air of superiority, but Noah didn’t have the context to consider Edward superior, and Edward (who couldn’t fly or do decent magic) didn’t have the means to convince him. Now his words were coming out as if he were conversing with an equal. He had been so appalled by Grappy’s suggestion that they very well might be.

Noah turned.

“What do you call this place?”

““Ark.””

“I mean all of this,” said Edward, gesturing out toward the water.

““Big lake.””

“The whole of the world. The place you lived. Is it near Mead?”

“Mead?”

“Yar. Mead is where I’m from. Where we’d never seen a storm, and there were unicorns and trolls and ghryst and elves and ... ”

Edward stopped, realizing how different Mead was from this place. He remembered losing his sense of direction before blacking out, feeling that he could be anywhere. And with that came a sensation that some deep part of him remembered as if in a dream. Something his mind had hidden when he’d awoken: a sense of something huge and sturdy splitting into millions of little pieces. Edward couldn’t remember anything beyond that vague feeling, and a notion that tasted like desperation.

“I’ve never heard of Mead,” Noah said. “Should we go there? I have no elves or trolls.”

Edward got a brief mental picture, imagining Noah trying to shove elves into the hold. It wouldn’t be pretty. They would want to remain above deck, as Edward had, and would probably rope the humans and cast spells on their spindly bodies.

“I don’t know where Mead is from here,” Edward answered. Saying it aloud made him sad. He couldn’t help but feel that wherever this place was (Noah still hadn’t answered that question), it was somewhere over the rainbow from Mead. He might never return.

Noah shrugged then returned his eyes to the horizon. Edward looked up, seeing the sky empty and devoid of flying unicorns, wondering where he was.



CHAPTER 14

NIGHT MAGIC

Noah was willing to let Edward bunk with the humans, but the other humans were less accommodating. This was fine with Edward because all of the humans stank. Unicorns stayed clean by virtue of the magic in their bodies. Humans seemed to require constant cleaning to remove the layers of filth that came not just from their environment but from within themselves. Edward had never realized this before and was disgusted to learn it. Apparently, humans were fluid factories, always pushing oils and liquids through their skins. The oils and liquids dried on them, forming a disgusting stew that crusted with tiny things that generated even more filth. If Edward had any magic at his disposal, he would've subjected them all to a daily scouring. The only way to bathe was to haul water up over the sides and rub down in a giant half barrel on the deck. Because this took so much effort, the humans never bothered. They all stank, so they stopped noticing the way everything else stank. Edward, who was used to the perfumed scents of unicorns and Mead flowers, did not.

He found a sort of closet above deck and made it his home, fortifying it with some thankfully clean straw from the hold. He didn't like straw; he was as used to soft grass (and, recently, his appy's back) as he was to the Mead smells. The alternative was to lie on the deck boards, which Noah finally admitted, after some prodding, had been repurposed from an old pigsty.

Everything in the ark was disgusting and loud and putrid and annoying. Edward felt as if he were sullied simply by being on it. His initial companionship with Noah had mostly held, but the fresh luster of seeing humans' other side (the side that didn't look like idiot barbarians when watched from afar) was quickly subdued by their general filth. The unicorn spoke with Noah because the others seemed disturbed by what they still thought was a talking horse (Edward kept his wings tucked around the others and allowed them to think what they wanted; it was just easier even though his pride protested) and because he was therefore the only sentient being he could talk to. *Any conversational port in a storm*, Edward thought — ironic, seeing as he'd apparently caught the end of a very long storm in

this strange new place with its odd new animals and lack (for the most part) of the animals and beings he knew.

The storm's conclusion delighted the humans. Edward, who had seen clear skies for the week or so he'd been flying (it certainly hadn't been forty days), was less impressed with the current clear skies. Watching the ark's handful of human occupants smile and mill the decks, Edward began to get an impression of what their long stay in the cramped ark must have been like. He listened to their tales, and he asked Noah about his adventures when they were alone together. He learned that unlike in Mead, the flood here had started slowly following a very hard, very steady rain that was, more often than not, accompanied by wind and lightning. Noah had tried to keep an eye on the humans from his village, but quickly it was all lost as waters and wind swept everything away. Sometimes it rained without storming, but the rain never ceased, until there was nothing but the ark and an endless horizon.

When night came, much of Noah's wild-eyed, bushy-haired mania seemed to vanish into the evening's somber mood. The stars were bright overhead — different, Edward was sure, from the stars he was used to. There were moments when he panicked and wondered if he was the mad one, and moments when he thought back to the storm and his dim memory, buried in a dream, of some great thing breaking. There were moments when Edward considered Grappy's stories about other worlds, as fantastical as those had always seemed. Mostly he tried to forget everything so he could be a colt standing on a deck in the dark, speaking to a voice that he could pretend, if Edward looked away, was another unicorn back in Mead.

"Did it really just *happen*, Noah?" Edward asked. "There were no signs? No indications as to what might have caused it?" The unicorn didn't elaborate but didn't trust himself to do so. "It" to Noah would mean the flood. To Edward, "it" meant much more — his dislocation from everything he'd ever known, for instance.

"I heard that voice. Then I started to build. Just as I finished, the rains came." Edward looked over, despite the reminder that his companion was human. Noah met his eye.

"The rains waited for you to finish?"

"That's when it started. That's all I know."

"Why you?"

"I don't know."

“Did you traffic in magic?”

It was the first time Edward had mentioned magic. They’d been on the boat for five days by Edward’s count, floating along as the floodwaters hopefully receded (there was no way to tell without landmarks), and waiting for land to show so they could finally disembark. In all that time, Edward had kept magic to himself. He didn’t want to draw attention, to elicit an expectation that he should be able to perform (to make the water go away or repair leaks in the boat, for instance), but after enough time watching the humans, Edward began to doubt they knew the concept.

“*Magic?*”

“Yar, magic. Using the universal mind, focusing energy ...” The unicorn reminded himself that humans didn’t have magic within themselves. “Using enchanted objects.”

“As far as I know, Edward,” said Noah, and the unicorn was reminded that of all the humans, only Noah ever used his name, “only the stars and skies use magic.”

“So you have never encountered anything that ... seemed to do things that only Providence could do.”

“Providence?”

“Mayhap the voice you mentioned,” Edward said. “We might call that Providence.”

“Hmm. In ‘Mead.’”

“Yar.”

Noah thought then shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. You have magic in Mead?”

“All unicorns are magic.”

“Really? Can you get us to land?”

Edward realized he probably shouldn’t be discussing any of this with the crazy, wild-eyed human. But something told him to continue, so he did.

“No. I don’t have magic yet. I mean, I *have* it. But I can’t use it because I’m too young.”

“And because your horn is small?” Noah added.

Edward felt his lip curl. “Yar, that too. But it will grow.”

Finally Noah said, “Why did you ask about magic?”

“I was just thinking about something my grap ... my grandfather told me,” Edward said, switching to the word Noah would understand. “He was afraid that humans were ...” Edward trailed off, unsure if he was doing

something wrong by conveying Grappy's suspicions to Noah. Did it matter that the humans knew what they were doing was wrong? How could *that* matter, seeing as the humans on the ark had no magic? If Noah had been from the Realm, he'd have a magic boat propeller. Noah was floating. He didn't bathe. He chewed dried corn soaked in rainwater rather than using a mealstone to generate tasty food for his whims.

"Were what?" said Noah. In the dark, his voice seemed calm — nothing like crazy daytime Noah.

"Where I'm from," Edward began again, looking up at the unfamiliar stars, "humans have learned to harness magic. But because they don't understand it, Grappy feared they were causing a ... a kind of rift."

Edward looked over at Noah, anticipating a string of endless questions. Noah simply said, "Oh."

"Grappy worried that humans tinkering with magic would cause some sort of a calamity. I was wondering if you'd tinkered."

"And caused the flood?" Noah seemed almost offended.

Edward shrugged.

"Well," said Noah, "that voice said a lot of things. Like, it said to collect sand fleas. But I didn't collect sand fleas ... though somehow I'm sure they'll survive anyway."

Edward looked over then out on the dark water.

Beside him, Noah said, "This magic. What can it do? And what kind of artifacts have humans around you learned to use?"

"It could propel your boat. It could mayhap allow us to fly above the water if there were a reason. It could make heat, cold, clean water, food ..."

"Where can I find these things?"

The question made Edward uncomfortable. Noah's voice was light, but in it he could hear the small speck of greed that all humans had, whether they knew it or intended it or not. Helping to balance his discomfort came another thought planted by Grappy back at the haven: Humans were necessary for unicorns. Grappy had wanted them to pair so the unicorn's pure mind could absorb some of the humans' impurity. *Partnering with humans gives us our peaches*, he'd said, referring to the dark tree's fruit. Mayhap it was okay to discuss these things with Noah. Mayhap it was even what Grappy had meant when he'd said Edward would play an important

role — mayhap it was right that Edward was partnering in this way, swapping light and dark across species.

“They may not exist here,” Edward said. “This place is different from Mead. Mayhap there is no magic here.”

That didn’t make sense. The world was the world, and every world’s beginning was birthed in magic. If Edward wasn’t in the world of Mead anymore, the magic here would simply take a different form.

“Oh.”

“But if it did,” the unicorn said, “you’d have to understand that it comes in equal parts, light and dark. If humans here discover magic, you’d have to accept both.” He tried to remember what Grappy had said, feeling reckless for even broaching the topic. “You’d have to accept that dark magic is as valid as light, and its necessary antidote. And that you’d have to ... like ... combine them.” Edward was reaching. He’d arrived at the end of his knowledge, and had perhaps gone beyond it. He was, in other words, speaking out of his hindquarters.

Noah nodded. “It’s like the flood.”

Edward’s head snapped sideways.

“Water,” said Noah, looking out. He was quiet for long enough that Edward thought he’d lost what he wanted to say. Then he continued: “Once I realized what was going to happen — and started trying to warn others to build boats, and man, did *that* not go well — I asked the voice, when it would talk to me, why it would be a flood, and why I alone was tasked with helping at least a few of us to survive. It said that everything has a dual nature, and that while water sustains and cleans, it can also kill us. It said that we were supposed to be fruitful and multiply, but that we’d been too fruitful in some ways.”

“So you were being punished?” Edward asked. “According to this voice?”

Noah shook his head. “The flood wasn’t a punishment. It was a consequence.”

“A consequence of what?”

“Something,” said Noah. “But I was being warned, not threatened. I got the impression that the flood would be our fault — mayhap even my fault, though I don’t see how that’s possible — without being something set upon us because we’d done wrong. We did something, and the flood happened. But we brought it upon ourselves.”

“How?” said Edward.

“I don’t know,” Noah said. “The voice had an annoying tendency to show up and tell me to do things, but it never seemed willing to answer questions. I thought it was messing with me.”

Edward recalled how Grappy had spoken of the voice — and yar, Noah’s assessment seemed about right. Then he thought of Mead’s flood, and how it had arrived with much less pomp and circumstance than it had in Noah’s world, and that seemed less right. Whether or not the reasons were clear, this world seemed to have experienced a cycle of trespass and consequence. Mead, by contrast, had simply been blindsided, also by water.

Finally Noah stood and slapped Edward amiably on the back.

“It’s all beyond me, Edward,” he said. “And right now, I just need to sleep. Because tomorrow will be the day we find land.”

Edward almost laughed. He didn’t, but he *almost* did. It was the closest he’d come to being friendly since making the humans’ acquaintance. Noah said the same thing every night as a matter of ritual. Yet still the world held nothing but endless blue above and below.

In the morning they saw a small strip of green in the direction of the sunrise. When the sun cleared the horizon, the strip was still there. The ship’s few oars were brought out, and the humans rowed. The water was still, and the wind was absent. The going was slow, given the ark’s size and weight, but by evening the front of their hull had settled into the wet ground with a squishing sensation.

The gangway was lowered. The humans anchored the boat and stepped down, finding their feet immediately in mud. They laughed. Edward, whose feet had only so briefly touched land since the day his grappies had died, laughed too. The ground was too wet for Edward to disembark but he did anyway, and he sank, then soldiered forward and soon found himself on land that was sun-dried enough to support his weight.

He looked down as his white legs shed the mud and became pristine. He found himself standing in green grass, long enough to have been growing for weeks. When Edward looked below the boat’s prow, he saw long grass there too, growing impossibly below the water’s surface.



CHAPTER 15

A VERY MYSTERIOUS CAT

The humans wanted to lie in the grass and hug the land. It became a very spiritual experience, which in Edward's mind meant *stupid*. The unicorn wasn't ready to give up on Mead. If he'd made it to where he was, he could get back. The humans weren't interested in leaving; as far as they were concerned, this brick of impossible land (how had the grass grown underwater?) was only one thing: a gift. Despite Noah's words, it quickly became clear that most of the humans *did* consider the flood to be a punishment, and the last thing they wanted to do was annoy whatever it was that had punished them by leaving. Going, they seemed to think, would be ungrateful.

But to Edward, who had things to do and places to go, moving on was sensible. The land's sudden appearance seemed too fortuitous and too downright strange (Edward kept thinking of the grass) to be anything other than magic. It didn't seem like a flood that was receding. It seemed like a ready-made new world surfacing to replace the old one. Despite Noah's suggestion that there was no magic in this world, Edward, once attuned and on land, found Noah's blindness baffling. How could humans not feel the land's immense magical wealth? How could they not see what was all around them? The sun shone. The plants grew. Noah had saved many animals, but Edward could already see that plenty had survived on their own. There were birds in trees farther on, yet Edward could see floodwater lines on surrounding hills that clearly indicated the trees had been underwater. Yet the trees had survived, the birds had survived, various roaming animals had survived. It could only be magic.

Edward said his farewell to Noah and the ark's crew — both smelly humans and smelly animals — and started to walk. There was nobody around to ask the unicorn where he was going, but if Edward had been asked, he would have answered, "Away."

As the unicorn continued to walk, he found himself more attuned to the world around him. Edward could see animals that he and Noah both knew (honeybees) and animals he'd seen on Noah's boat that he'd never seen before (long-legged creatures he believed were called "deers"), but Edward also started to see creatures that Noah had said he'd never heard of. There

were pixies collecting morning dew from the lips of bright blue forget-me-knots. He saw a stirring that, though it was only from the corner of his eye, Edward thought might be fairies. Beyond all of these, the unicorn began to see creatures and features *he'd* never heard of. There were tiny human-shaped things that hid in the brush as he passed, then swarmed behind him as if curious and unwilling to approach. There were strange, large grasshopper-like insects with bright eyes that could climb trees then pivot their rear legs and walk upright like people. There were mushrooms everywhere, multicolored and spotted, sturdy enough for even Edward to sit on, if unicorns had been able to truly sit. There were occasionally intelligent-looking creatures clambering on the mushrooms, naked, watching him. They had small, sharp teeth and tails yet held no menace in their expressions as he passed. They seemed to travel in groups of three, and as Edward went by, the nude peach things would run in front, watch him go by from atop the large mushrooms, then scamper past again.

The land was thick with palpable magic by the time Edward noticed that the stars overhead seemed to have changed again. At first, he thought he was imagining things (the change was subtle; a cup-shaped group of stars seemed flatter, though still present), but the arrangement seemed to shift unseen during the days and show him their altered configurations through every clear night. By Edward's fifth day of walking, the unicorn realized that they had changed completely. The cup shape was gone. The W shape was gone. But the sky above still wasn't Mead's.

Edward seemed to be traversing worlds merely by moving his feet. Land ahead continued to sprawl in accommodation. The grass continued to taste nearly as sweet as it had in Mead. Edward found a grove of apples, ate his fill, and then (with some difficulty) used his hooves to knock a few of the fruits into a sling of vines he kicked from one of the trees. His appies could have used their horns to assemble a large cart to pull the apples behind them, but Edward, working without magic, could only manage to drag his ivy sling. He did this for a day, then stopped and ate the apples he hadn't lost or stepped on, hoping to find more fruit soon.

Sometimes, Edward attempted to fly. Several times each day, he found a suitable spot and tried to flap his wings and get airborne. The true skill continued to elude him, and he could almost imagine Ammy and Appy mocking him. He missed their mockery. Edward managed to forget his predicament and remain confident while the sun was shining, but at the end

of each day, with the strange stars visible overhead, he felt alone — only it was lonelier than alone. He was the only unicorn in existence, it seemed, and didn't understand the beings around him. He even tried speaking with a few (the tailed, sharp-toothed creatures and the tiny human-like things both seemed promising), but neither would speak, even if able. And, Edward realized, the folly of thinking they might be *able* to talk to him if they wanted was ludicrous. Mead's unicorn language was its own. Even the elves didn't speak the same language as the unicorns, so why would anything he encountered here?

Then he remembered that Noah and the other humans on the ark had spoken his language exactly. *Exactly* — down to the smallest nuance and shade of meaning. There had been words each hadn't known, but that was simply vocabulary. The languages themselves were so much the same, they must have sprung from the same source, as impossible as that was to believe. Mayhap the same held true here.

Or, Edward thought as he studied the strangely altering landscape, mayhap this was all a dream. Maybe he wasn't really here. Maybe he'd gotten lost in the magic, or had returned to the Wellspring after all. His surroundings made less and less sense. He saw what appeared to be sweet, individually made treats growing on stalks as if they were plants. He saw empty domiciles made out of huge, smooth slats that looked like enormous trader's game cards. The streams sometimes ran with a brown liquid Edward was afraid to sample but that smelled sweet and rich and aromatic. Maybe none of it was real, seeing as it seemed so fantastical. And mayhap *that* was why he and Noah had understood each other — because neither really existed.

But in the end, none of that mattered. The days continued to turn like a flipping coin. The same giant yellow sun rose each morning, and Edward saw new things that he didn't understand. It set each night, and he heard noises that weren't there before. After a week, he had no idea if he was getting closer to Mead or farther away, or even if he was dreaming or awake, but the unicorn was convinced it didn't matter. Who was to say that one reality was better than any other? Edward was a creature born of magic. Magic was one force that truly proved that thoughts could be real, and that potential was, when you got down to it, no different from objects that had blossomed past potential and into existence.

Edward had fortunately made peace with his odd and shifting reality by the time he encountered an enormous white smile with nothing behind it.

The unicorn stopped, staring at the giant crescent of teeth hovering above a branch to his side. The teeth were glowing as if with an internal light. They were geometric and rectangular and not rounded off even as much as his own perfect unicorn teeth (so much as he could feel with his tongue, anyway). They looked like the teeth of a human with a very wide mouth. Only there were no lips around them, so if the teeth had a host, Edward couldn't see who or what it was.

"Lost, are we?" said the teeth, opening to reveal a tongue and nothingness.

Edward had seen too many odd things to be put off by a disembodied mouth. "Maybe."

Eyes fell into place from above, then the area around the smile dissolved into what appeared to be a huge purple-and-white striped cat. "I like your nubbin," it said, gesturing toward the unicorn's tiny horn. "Are you from the center?"

"The center?" The forest was dark. Edward wasn't precisely afraid, but the noises were still unfamiliar and he had no idea what he'd encounter ahead. He wanted to dismiss the talking cat on principle (who did this cat think he was, hiding in a tree and acting superior?), but that would have been outdated unicorn pride. He'd just been thinking about how he had nobody to talk to and no guide, and now he had these teeth. And, apparently, the cat behind them.

"The axial world," said the cat, swishing its thick, plumb-bob tail. "You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

The cat chuckled, then kneaded the branch. "You *don't* know."

Now Edward really wanted to keep walking. Withholding information and making others beg for it was a unicorn trick. He should know; other unicorns had done it to him back in Mead, constantly. But he told himself that he was a stranger in a strange land with no idea how to find his way home. The cat might or might not turn out to be an unhelpful jerk, but there couldn't be any harm in taking a few minutes to see what he knew.

"Fine," said Edward. "Tell me."

The cat rose, then paced on the branch. The cat was fat (its body the size of Edward's head), but the thin branch stayed solid and firm below, as

if it weighed nothing. As the cat paced, its body shimmered in and out of existence, sometimes leaving only the smile — and, occasionally, its staring white eyes.

“You are far from home, unicorn,” said the cat.

Edward blunted his surprise. “You know what I am?”

“Of course. And I know your world. We all do. It is the center.”

Edward rolled his eyes. The cat laughed as if it had never seen a unicorn rolling its eyes before. Edward had learned from the best: his appies, supreme artists of sarcasm and derision.

“All right,” said the cat. “Imagine a ring of worlds, one inside another. Each world is self-contained, and knows nothing of the others, under normal circumstances. And further, imagine that in the center of this ring is one world like the axle on which the others revolve. That one is the first world, where all the words began.”

Edward shook his head, confused.

“Oh, come now. A big unicorn brain like yours? You understand that the sun of every world holds the planets by an invisible tether. You know one moves around the other, with the largest in the center. If there is a ring of worlds, how could they hold onto one other without a giant, central world for them to spin around?”

The conversation’s assumptions were lost on the unicorn. There was a sun in Mead’s sky. Magic made it rise. Magic made it set. Magic made the grass grow. Edward supposed one seemed to be moving around the other (by all appearances, the sun moved around Mead), but he didn’t know of any tether. Unless the tether was magic itself.

“*Oh*,” said the cat with something like pity. “You *really* don’t know.” It tittered. “Well, that’s how it is. And as I said, your world’s the center.”

Edward had misjudged the cat’s potential. This was a waste of time. The cat was a jerk. So he walked past, into the moonlit darkness. The white smile appeared on a branch ahead, followed by the cat’s body.

“Does it disturb you?” said the cat.

“What?”

“The fact that you’re not alone.”

Edward didn’t know if the cat was referring to multiple worlds or the cat’s immediate presence in his life.

“You are disturbing me plenty.” Edward kept walking. The giant white smile again appeared on a branch in his line of sight.

“It’s okay,” said the cat. “You don’t have to believe me, or understand, or care. I was merely offering to help you. If, that is, you are lost and in need of assistance.”

This was intolerable. Edward didn’t want to play games, but the truth was that he *didn’t* know where he was going and *did* long for Mead. He’d already decided that Mead was somehow different from Noah’s world, and that Noah’s world was somehow different from where he was now. But Edward didn’t want to acknowledge the cat as correct. Accepting help from the cat was a hideous double-edged sword. He needed help, but didn’t want to surrender control.

He finally admitted, “I’m trying to find Mead.”

“Well, well,” said the cat, smiling its idiot smile and pacing back and forth on the motionless branch. “Mead, Mead, Mead. The axial world, which took its splinters, same as the rest. Things move around these days, you know. Is it *this* way?” The cat pointed to the right with its tail. The fat tail flip-flopped and pointed to the left. “Or is it *that* way?”

Edward stared at the cat.

“Oh. I see. You don’t wish to play games. Or at least, that’s what you want to pretend. You don’t care for this trickster who has appeared in front of you because you are serious and he seems quite mad. I am the tip of the iceberg. You’ll want my advice, or else you might go in *that* direction — ” He pointed at an angle, forward but down a path to the left. For some reason Edward knew that the cat was finally speaking true. “ — and would run into the Hatter, who makes my madness look like nothing.”

The cat’s eyes swam as its body dissolved, then hopped into altered positions on its return. Its left eye had become its right; its right had become its left.

His face growing more serious, the cat said, “Tell me, unicorn. Are you real?”

Edward was startled by the cat’s question. It stared, waiting for an answer, but Edward refused to give it one.

The cat managed a fat, vanishing cat’s version of a shrug. “Fine, don’t answer. But I know you think you are. Everything believes it is real. In fact, I happen to believe *I* am.” The cat stood on its hind legs, then removed its pointy ears and bowed under them like a Realm human’s hat. “A common affliction. It is even understandable. Sometimes we have our favorite sounds and musics, and we think that they are ‘good’ or that other things do

not sound as pretty. Then someone disagrees, and we'll have to admit it was only our opinion."

Edward had tried. He really needed a guide, and he was willing to let the cat do what it had to, so long as it would, in the end, steer him toward Mead. But the cat had spoken true: it *was* mad, and it was hard to believe any Hatter being worse.

Edward started walking. Again, the cat's smile preceded his path.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about," said the cat's white smile. Its body shimmered back to life. "The worlds are still soft, following the Cataclysm. You believe you can walk away from me. But if that's just your opinion, *how can you?*"

"You really are mad."

"Not at all," said the cat, extending a leg and proceeding to clean it with its tongue. "I am merely amused."

"I meant 'mad' as in 'crazy.'" And again, Edward was struck by the similarities in their languages. It wasn't just that words were the same. Shades of meaning were fruits on a tree.

"Interesting, isn't it," said the cat, stopping its licking, "how the world seems to mold to you?" It was as if the cat had read his mind about their languages. "But that's how things are, when objectivity fades."

"What are you talking about?" said Edward, hating his asking.

"Ah," said the cat. It lay down on the branch, eyes dancing. "But it all comes back to my question, which you never answered. Do you believe you are real?"

"Of course." Edward didn't add, though it was in his voice: *And what kind of an idiot question is that?*

"Well, everything believes that. But much of what is here are mere imaginings of other worlds, where some of those imaginings are, in fact, from the imaginations of others. There was once an order and there will be again, if the rifts ever heal, but for now there is no way to know." The cat put a paw to its chest, indicating itself. "*I* happen to know that unicorns were the first beings in the axial world. But not everyone knows that, so who is to say that your entire kind isn't a mere flight of fancy in the mind of a dreaming girl somewhere?"

"You act like it's arbitrary. But you said you knew it, and I know it. My Grappy was Adam, and my Grammy was Eve."

“Oh, then you must be Edward the Brave!” said the cat. “I have heard stories about you. But that’s the problem, isn’t it? Stories. Who is to say you don’t merely exist in bubbles of thought?”

Edward had never been called “Edward the Brave” and had no idea what madness the cat was blathering.

“Are you going to tell me how to get to Mead or not?”

“Oh, but I *am* telling you. You just aren’t listening.”

Edward resisted the urge to walk away, knowing the cat would follow. “Talk sense.”

“Sense cannot be made,” said the cat. “It’s something that must be, well, *sensed*.” Then, seeing that Edward was unimpressed, it rolled onto its back with a noise of resignation. “All right,” it said. “Let me tell you the way of the world. There was a great sundering of the borders between spaces, and now the axle has run through the others. We used to know clearly what was corporeal in one world and what belonged in their own spaces — to remain mere thoughts in opposite worlds, if anything at all — but all that’s in flux. You really can’t know where to go because it isn’t merely a matter of placing one of those big, white, mayhap-real hooves in front of another. You’ll have to make a choice.”

“Why did you call me Edward the Brave?”

“Because that’s who you are. Or, mayhap who you will be. But it’s like I said: I know you from stories. But which is the chicken, and which is the egg? Are you here to create stories that will later be told? Or are you here *because* stories were told?” The cat began kneading its claws into the branch. “It’s like I said, the worlds are still soft. Nature always finds its rhythm, regardless of the things that creatures or thoughts build within it. It does not care that you and I are here — ” The cat vanished entirely, not even leaving its smile. When it spoke, its voice came from nowhere. “ — or that we aren’t.”

The cat reappeared, now upside-down.

“Up is down right now,” it said. “Right is left. Now is then. Back is forth.” It made a circle with its paw. “All of that. For you, that means that you will encounter many things you have never seen. But that is not the same thing as seeing things that didn’t exist before, nor is it the same as seeing things that *did* exist before, because mayhap they did and mayhap they didn’t, depending on where you are at the time, and where they are

relative to where they began. And, of course, depending on what you believe.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Oh, for sure. But that doesn’t mean I’m incorrect.”

Edward stared at the cat. Its white teeth plinked into a pattern of blackness — every other one — so that its smile looked like a chessboard. Teeth and cat reappeared, mayhap waiting for Edward to make up his mind.

“Where should I go?” the unicorn finally asked.

“Forward.”

“Which direction, I mean?”

“Any direction.”

“Which direction is Mead?”

“All directions.”

Edward groaned.

“You think that progress comes from straight lines. That has never been less true than now, after the Cataclysm.”

“You mean the flood?”

“I mean the Cataclysm. When the spindle broke. Some places, it might have been a flood. But even later in the same world, it might have been something different. If you break a nut, you are used to believing that the nut was broken in a time and place, but that is linear thinking. I thought you were a unicorn?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you should know magic, yet are thinking like a human.”

Edward wanted to run the cat through, but didn’t have a long, sharp horn yet and barely knew magic.

“Oh, I know that sounds like an insult, but you should be more respectful. There are worlds where, to humans, unicorns are thoughts of fancy and nothing else. But my point, if you could stop thinking like a two-legger, is that the Cataclysm occurred everywhere. Everywhen. You don’t need to go to a place so much as simply *go*. If you are standing in a world that isn’t yours — as you are right now — then you should keep moving until you find yourself where you should be. If you don’t keep moving, you risk becoming mired in the wrong place and becoming part of a story forever.”

“Are you saying this place isn’t real?”

"I'm not saying that at all."

"But you just said that ... "

"You would do so much better if you could see the tapestry." The cat shook its head. "Such a pity."

Edward ignored the passive insult. "You are saying to just walk? Keep moving?" It was awful counsel, but it was what he'd been doing anyway, and at least it would get him away from the cat.

"Just walk," it said, rolling over on the strangely immobile branch. "Walk, and think. Remember who and what you believe you are. We know stories will one day be told about you, and you get to decide whether those things are merely a foreign world's legends. The world's fabric is thin, and if you ever find your Mead, you must cross at the tear, where the axle broke the veil. That crossing will not be easy, even if it seems so. A straightforward path is a trick. You must give it complications. You may see things you believe to have already happened, things that are yet to be, and things that will challenge your sense of what is and what isn't."

"Like jerky vanishing cats?"

"Oh, but there is only *one* of me. I believe it so firmly that it has become true."

Edward stared at the cat, ready to be done with this farce. Fortunately, he had an excuse. The cat said he had to keep moving. The trick was convincing the cat that he didn't need to keep Edward company.

"Anything else?"

"Yes," said the cat. "Don't forget to enjoy yourself." Then his eyes made small jerking motions, seeming to urge Edward on. The unicorn started walking then stopped and looked back, a bit intrigued that he had clearance to leave and was returning.

Edward said, "One more thing."

"Of course."

"Why are you here?"

"This is where I belong."

"In my path, I mean. You know me. You know the whole story, beyond what anyone else seems to know — certainly more than I knew, and based on your own tale, I'm from the first race. So how did we meet? Or have you been following me?"

The cat shook its head, as if amazed by Edward's obtuseness.

"I am here because I am a part of the story."

“What story?”

“Your story.”

“I am not a story,” said Edward, already annoyed that he’d asked.

“That’s the spirit.”

The cat vanished, leaving only white teeth and two eyes.

One eye winked, and Edward found himself alone in the quiet, dark night.



CHAPTER 16

AN IMPORTANT DECISION

Edward tried to forget everything the cat had said as he kept walking. It was all so annoying and unhelpful. It was presumptuous (the cat thought it knew him more than he knew himself!) and insulting (unicorns could be flights of fancy rather than the progenitors of existence?) and downright unhelpful. If anything, the cat's *help* seemed like it would inevitably steer him in the wrong direction. When a unicorn found himself somewhere unfamiliar, it was best to stop, ask around, and determine both where he was and in which direction he should be going. If he *just kept moving*, he'd inevitably find himself farther from Mead than ever, unless he was very lucky.

Once Edward judged he was far enough from the cat's domain, he lay down to sleep and study his unfamiliar surroundings.

He'd met the cat in a forest like the ones around Mead: There were large trees with long branches interspersed with saplings and patched undergrowth. He'd distinctly heard and felt pine needles cracking under his hooves and was fairly certain he'd kicked into a few pine cones. Closer to the spot where he'd spoken with the cat, Edward had felt leaves tickling the skin above his hooves and, in the moonlight, had noticed leaves on the trees. Even after walking for a while after leaving the cat, he'd still been in the woods, and, working mostly by feel and the few beams of silver moonlight penetrating the canopy, had cleared himself a bed in a soft spot covered with pine needles. Now, he woke to grass.

He thought back to the encounter with the strange, vanishing cat. He looked around at the grove, with green grass underhoof and tentative morning light breaking in what he assumed — in the absence of contradicting evidence — was east. He felt a sudden urge to orient himself — not in a location on a map but in a location within the cosmos. The stars had already been washed by the dawn, and Edward couldn't tell whether he would have seen Mead stars or stars from the newly crossed worlds.

Edward strolled to the glade's edge where the smattering of trees surrendered to meadow. He looked across, feeling a strange disorientation. Or, perhaps more accurately, he might have felt the return of a sense of *orientation*. Was this Mead? Had he never left? The idea seemed ludicrous,

given that he'd last seen Mead as an unbroken expanse of water and that he'd flown and walked for weeks since that time, but it was tempting. Which, really, was the more ridiculous proposition: That he'd had a long dream or that his old world had ended and he'd wandered through at least two new worlds to encounter a crazy man with a ship full of animals and a vanishing cat?

The cat was the easiest — and most tempting encounter — to dismiss. For one, it was the most recent; he could *actually* have seen Mead flood and *actually* have met Noah and *actually* have wandered through sundered worlds yet still might have imagined or dreamed the cat. He'd seen more amazing things than vanishing animals in the past, given the magic of Mead (and of the *other* unicorns, he thought with some degree of jealousy), but the cat wasn't just magical — if magic was even the tool it had wielded. The cat was prophetic, like a story he seemed to remember hearing (Where? He couldn't place it) about prophetic owls. Its appearance was strangely coincidental, as if it had been waiting for him. And its advice, taken all by itself even without the rest of the absurdities Edward seemed to remember, was so obtuse as to hurt his head. The cat had made no sense; all of its words had been wrapped in riddles and doubletalk. *Back is forth?* What did that mean? The cat spoke of reality as a matter of opinion, and of place and direction as arbitrary.

It had to be a dream.

Edward let the idea sink in as he surveyed the peaceful meadow, breathing slowly and deeply, smelling the air's fresh scent and finding that it recalled memories of Mead and other unicorns. He half expected to see Ammy and Appy at the meadow's far end, grazing as if nothing had happened.

Appealing though the thought was, the unicorn couldn't make himself believe it. Like it or not, he'd met that cat in the woods last night. And like it or not, he'd awoken somewhere very different than where he'd lain down. Edward wanted to believe he'd been delusional when falling asleep, but his head was clear. Unless he'd been somehow magicked (and he hadn't; surely he'd have felt outside magic's influence), then it had actually happened. All of it. He had to face reality — such as it was.

Edward walked out into the meadow, forcing himself to admit that something had shifted. The meadow, on further inspection, wasn't like Mead after all. The unicorn grazed the grass. It tasted somehow different —

almost effervescent, as if he were drinking one of Grammy's fizzies. The sunlight felt somehow wrong. It wasn't unpleasant, and the temperature was right, but the angles were off, even accounting for the differences in sunlight dependent on season. The air was sweet but held something Edward couldn't quite place. The scent recalled Grammy's food, and even a hint of her marshmallow chocolate.

He walked through the meadow and found himself entering a path that emerged from its end. The path was yellow underhoof, composed of small, rectangular stones. When he'd first entered the path, Edward thought it was crushed dirt, but as he walked, his hooves began to clack against the hard, handmade paving stones.

As he began to realize the yellow road underhoof seemed like something humans might make, Edward arrived at the lip of a valley and almost gasped. Behind him, the path was small stones. In front, the road seemed to become better and harder, its stones so perfectly aligned and squared off that it looked like the work of unicorn magic, or of machines he couldn't fathom. At the very end of the long and winding road, very near the bottom of the valley, was a sprawling green city that looked as if it were made of crystal.

Edward heard a small noise behind him. He turned to see a tiny human in a pointed hat run past him without stopping, as if he weren't even there. He followed the man's passage, watching his short legs churn on the yellow stone road. But as he did, he realized that the path was indeed normal yellow stones, not particularly well set, and that the only structures in the distance were huts with plumes of smoke curling from their chimneys. But hadn't he just seen a city made of glass?

Edward shook his head.

Pretending that he hadn't just experienced a strange shift in reality (*I'm tired*, he reasoned), Edward continued down the path and past the small domiciles. He didn't stop or slow, nor did he attempt to speak with anyone he passed. For their part, the inhabitants of the huts and eventual villages didn't so much as look in the unicorn's direction as he passed. Edward wondered if it were possible that they couldn't see him but didn't want to know. So he walked, taking progression as progress.

Edward walked for most of a day. As he entered the valley, he decided he'd seen enough similar dwellings that he could consider the structures in the hollow, taken as a whole, to be a village. The entire place was occupied

by the strange men and women with the pointy hats. The men wore strange cloaks with straps that ran over their shoulders and attached in the back. The women wore dresses like humans but with frilly white garments visible (and audible; they rustled like leaves) underneath. There was plenty of village chatter, and the noises of many kept animals.

Later on, Edward encountered a settlement with occupants much like those of the first — small, like humans — but these people, Edward noticed, had large, hairy feet. All of the men carried small wooden pipes between their lips, from which a fragrant odor emerged on blue smoke. Their houses were different; rather than being thatched huts, all were cut into the sides of hills and had large, perfectly round doors.

He cleared the hairy-footed people without incident, stopped to drink from a stream, and realized that the air had begun to change in color. It was in the sky, not the sun. Edward trudged on, wondering if he was walking through a kind of pink cloud, and began to see things around him that were diverse and strange enough to be an oddities show:

A three-story house shaped like a boot, tended by a loud and seemingly human woman with a broom. As Edward passed, dozens of children climbed in and out of the windows and then ran screaming around the place. The woman yelled for order, and the children paid no attention.

An upright pig in human clothing cobbled flat red stones together with some sort of gray paste. With Edward within earshot, a second upright pig walked over to the first and said, in Edward's language, "I'm telling you, these bricks are overkill."

A human girl wearing a hooded red cloak, carrying a basket, skipped by. As Edward watched her depart, a wolf crept past, walking upright like the pigs, drooling.

After a while, Edward stopped wondering what he was seeing and decided that one of two things was true. Either he was dreaming (or his mind had snapped; same basic idea) and none of this was actually happening, or it was happening just as he saw it. There was no point straddling possibilities. If pigs were really building houses, then it was what it was and he had to accept it. If they weren't and Edward was actually asleep or cracked in Mead, then he might as well enjoy it and hope one day to wake. There was no advantage in denying his eyes. After a while it was almost like a defense mechanism.

The day grew long. The sun began to sink lower in the opposite sky, having traversed a strangely looping route that curled like a kinked hair. The landscape stayed fantastical. Roads turned into a hard substance, sticky when wet, sweet when his hooves pulverized it and sent dust to his face. He saw plants that bloomed, from stem to leaf, in colors that shouldn't exist. He saw creatures he'd never seen, including an enormous hairy thing walking hand in hand with a small human woman. He saw a creature under a bridge and heard a talking sheep call it a troll, but the troll was nothing like the enormous, dark creatures Edward knew from Mead. Finally he happened on a red wall, not unlike the walls of the pig's half-built house. On top of the wall sat a gigantic egg, wearing a face.

The egg was the first thing Edward had passed that had acknowledged his presence. Edward wasn't sure if he should be happy (attention meant he was still real, at least) or irritated. Sometimes a colt wanted to walk past a giant egg without being required to dignify its existence.

"Hey," said the egg.

Edward kept walking.

"Hey," the egg repeated.

Edward didn't look over.

"Oh, you're too good to talk? I see how it is."

Edward stopped and turned his head. He hadn't realized the egg was speaking to him. He wasn't used to giant eggs, and had no idea how they normally conducted themselves.

"You can see me," said Edward, feeling his sense of dreamy contemplation collapse into hard reality. A moment before he'd been experiencing a three-dimensional horror show featuring a giant egg who was, he realized now, wearing cowhide pants. He was forced to see it for real. It was singularly unpleasant, and Edward had a moment of pity wherein he wondered what had happened to his life.

"Oh, har-har," said the egg. Apparently, others had pretended to be invisible on this stretch of path in the past. It pointed to something on the ground with a tiny arm. "Hand me that, will you?"

Edward looked down at a pie.

"I can't hand it to you."

The egg put its hands on its hips. The motion made the top-heavy thing wobble. Edward had a moment where he thought it might fall.

“Look,” it said, “it’s none of your business whether I eat that pie or not. I know I have a bit of a weight problem. But what is that to you? Just hand it to me, and keep your judgment to yourself, okay?”

Edward looked at the pie again. “I literally *can’t* hand it to you,” he said. “I have no hands.”

“Magick it up here. You’re a unicorn, aren’t you?” His eyes went to Edward’s stump of a horn, and his egg cheeks puffed with laughter.

Edward suddenly didn’t want to tell this egg that he couldn’t do magic. “Why don’t you get it yourself?”

“Why don’t you jump up my butt?” said the egg. Then its tone changed and became less angry. “Okay, fine. I can’t get down. I had a ladder. Some jerk pig came and took it.”

“Hop down,” said Edward.

“But then I won’t be able to get back up. You see my bind.”

“Why would an egg want to sit on a wall? Get down, eat your pie, and return to your nest.”

This was the wrong thing to say. Hands back on its hips, the egg’s shell blushed red. “Oh, just because I’m an egg, I live in a nest? I have a very nice house across town, I’ll have you know. I had some pigs run pipe. I have indoor water! You should see the quality of my faucets.”

“Oh,” said Edward. Then, realizing he couldn’t pick up the pie and therefore had no more to discuss with the egg, resumed walking. The egg yelled after him.

“Don’t you walk away from me, punk!” it hollered from behind. “You think you’re better than me? What makes you so special, you with your stubby horn? What makes you so ... ” There was a surprised scream and a loud breaking. Edward turned to see the egg lying in pieces. Its mouth was split vertically down the middle, but that didn’t impair its ability to hector Edward. The two pieces of egg alternatively blurted rude words at Edward and asked if he was happy now that his shell was broken.

Edward looked around, wondering if he should call someone. He couldn’t do much himself because he only had clumsy hooves and no magic, but mayhap there was a shaman around. As soon as he thought it, two dozen humans galloped up and dismounted around the egg. The humans picked up a few pieces and began trying to fit them together. After a moment, the horses rose onto their rear legs and, intent to prove Edward wrong about hooves’ lack of dexterity, began to tap at the pieces as well.

“Is that egg going to make it?” said Edward, not particularly caring. Expressing feigned concern seemed preferable to helping, and the occasion did seem to call for something. He looked down at the shattered pieces of shell. There were a million.

One of the men waved a dismissive hand at Edward. “With all these horses and men?” He scoffed. “I’m sure we can handle it.”

Edward doubted it, but there was no point in arguing — especially seeing as the horses were proving more adept at egg-assembling than he could probably ever be. He wasn’t about to stick around and be shown up by a bunch of *horses*.

The sun was sinking as he left the village and again found himself alone. Human/pig/egg/creature dwellings thinned, then vanished. Nature returned, such as it was. The pink haze departed, and the light began to take on the familiar tinge of evening tangerine. Shadows became long, and the air became brisk, but not unpleasantly so.

Edward found himself wanting to slip into a fantasy and imagine himself back home in Mead. The light was exactly as he remembered it being as he’d played in the fields with Cerberus. In those golden evenings, Ammy would always try to call him home — and, owing to Edward’s small horn, would always fail. Edward had known the hour each of those times, of course, but usually chose to ignore it and stay out instead of heading home. Sometimes, golden evenings were just too gilded to abandon.

But where he was now wasn’t Mead, no matter how pleasant the cooling air felt on his hide. Soon night would fall (and what weird things might be *in* that night?), and then he’d look up and see unfamiliar stars, and he’d hear sounds he’d never before heard in his own world. He had to keep moving as the cat had told him — to keep trying to find his way home.

Edward crossed the field. Abruptly, it ended in thick woods. Ahead of him were two paths. He didn’t want to go backward. Backward was oddity, strangeness, and cats who spoke in riddles. Forward was the only way, and moving forward required him to make a choice.

He looked at the two paths in front of him, trying to decide which to take.

At first, the answer seemed obvious. The path on the left was bright and sunny — sunnier, in fact, than it should have been. There was a single tree on either side, and now that Edward looked more closely, the *path* wasn’t much more than those two trees. All he’d have to do would be to take a few

steps forward, and then he'd be in a place that was almost supernaturally warm and wonderful: a field filled with swaying grasses, squirrels, rabbits, and birds flitting through the air, singing their sweet song.

The path on the right, by contrast, was dark and foreboding. It was filled with trees that were black, gnarled, and mostly naked of leaves. The path seemed to extend downward into forever; those old trees arched overhead in a thick lattice that blocked out the sun, the moon, and the stars. The ground was paved with what looked like cinders: black, glassy, faceted chunks of burned wood that would crunch and crack underhoof. A slight breeze emerged from the path's cavernous mouth, and on its breath was a scent like meat gone bad. There were a few lights in the path, but all of them flickered on and off, like fireflies.

And suddenly Edward realized: *the correct choice was too obvious to be correct.*

He was walking through a land of strange magic and fantasy, and in that land he'd been presented with a coincidentally placed puzzle. But the left path ahead of him was too perfect. The right path was too sinister. It had to mean something.

Edward found himself remembering Adam.

He missed Grappy and Grammy. He'd always loved the long walk to their haven, and he'd always loved the time he spent there, drinking Grammy's hot marshmallow chocolate while the old unicorns spun their yarns. At the time, all of their tales — especially Grappy's — had seemed fantastical and invented. Now, Edward wondered if they might all have been real. If what the cat said were true, then at least here and now reality wasn't something that existed to be judged from the outside. At least here and now (while the world was apparently "soft"), reality was malleable. Grappy said often, "You create your own reality," and now Edward wondered if it wasn't sometimes literally true.

Adam had told Edward repeatedly: *Existence is not easy ... nor is it meant to be.*

The last time Edward had visited the haven, Adam and Eve's lesson had been heavy with morals — deep themes not so much to be thought upon but to be lived so that they could steep in his mind like hot tea. Adam had said that there was no "good" or "bad," and that both were required. Light was not to be sought. Dark was not to be avoided. It was conflict and the unknown that drove life's constant engine.

Ahead of him, the easy way was too easy. The hard way was too hard. He realized what he had to do.

Edward stepped into the dark path to his right. A knot of cinder exploded under his hoof, making his hide jump. But once he'd started forward, walking became easier. And although he flinched at every noise, he kept his hooves moving.

As he walked, he began to wonder if he was being foolish. His mind and soul wanted to pull back, to take him out of the dark path before it was too late. But that didn't seem right, so he just kept repeating Adam's themes, feeling as if he were growing older and wiser and taller and stronger as he did so — even as the dark path pressed in on him, even as schools of fireflies (if that's what they were) used their lights to create shapes in the dark, to make horrific faces at him.

Adam wanted unicorns to partner with humans because unicorns were pure light and humans contained dark. Eve had eaten the peach to pierce the veil and pollute herself, to sully Mead with the contamination of Darkness. Struggle, Adam had said, was like a grinding stone. You needed to wear away part of a dull edge to reveal the cutting surface beneath. Peace was not progress. Fighting and obstacles were necessary. Difficulty was an ally. And difficulty always made the world better for those who were not deterred by it.

Existence is not easy, Edward. Nor is it meant to be.

Cinders crunched underhoof. Thorns and brambles scratched at his sides. His heart beat in his ears like a drum. He wondered at his own invulnerability, trying to decide if he could heal if he were attacked. His body could do magic, but his horn could not. He wondered, as he took in the shapes in the dark, if he could die.

The tunnel's end closed behind him faster than it should have, as if the trees themselves had choked the tunnel closed like long fingers wrapped around a throat.



CHAPTER 17

THE DARK FOREST

An unknowable amount of time later, Edward emerged into a clearing that was barely lighter than the path he'd come through. It made sense: He'd been in what he could only think of as a *tunnel* long enough for the sun to set. Still, he somehow got the impression that the dullness around him was as bright as it was going to get — that the pallor he saw around him was this place's version of daytime.

The grass beneath his hooves was bent and brown. There was light in the air, but it was like looking through foggy glass. The world was gray, and smelled like ash and fire. Edward was hungry after his walk (his *terrifying* walk, he had to admit), but there was nothing that looked like anything he wanted to eat. There were plants around the clearing that were probably green, but they seemed strange. They had single flowers atop tall stalks, and they had small, rod-thin leaves along their length that swayed in the ashy breeze and seemed to open and close like tiny hands. The flowers themselves were as bright blue as Adam's forget-me-knots, but inside the blue petals was a ring of orange, and the seed cluster in the middle was as red as human blood. In the center of the seeds was a black slit, small and horizontal. Edward couldn't help but think of that slit as a mouth, and couldn't bring himself to walk close enough to see if it was.

He walked through the clearing, leaving the path to creak and bow in on itself as if breathing. The red and blue flowers turned as he passed, their tiny leaves opening and closing. The dry grass, embedded in hard and cracked dirt, rustled underhoof. Edward felt himself shiver and tried to steel his resolve, but Grappy's platitudes suddenly meant less than nothing. He didn't care if dark had no meaning unless it was compared to light; *Edward* was light, and that light was giving the dark around him plenty of contrast. Compared to his warm inner glow, his surroundings felt cold. And on the heels of that cold feeling, Edward remembered something else Grappy had said often: that magic always sought balance. You couldn't separate light and dark for long — and Edward couldn't help but feel that his dark surroundings were hungry to absorb his light.

The clearing became a path. The path led into a village that was the utter opposite of the egg-and-pigs village he'd come through before

reaching the road's fork. There were dwellings here, but they were close to the road, almost cramped, and all seemed to be in disrepair. Edward saw rotting roofs, caving walls, and broken windows. Everything was painted (if it *was* painted and not simply black with mold) in browns and grays and flat black. He saw dark shapes overhead — sparrows or bats — flying in a cloud, circling once before moving on, as if watching and judging.

The road had turned into shards of shattered gray cobblestone, sick with pits that would shatter any human wheel. Edward had to watch his step lest he snap a bone, but because of the place's scant light, he could only see the holes as pits of deeper shadow amid the darkness. Looking around at the dwellings, he could see that there were faces in some of the windows. The faces were leering, darting back when they saw him. There were also some creatures outdoors; Edward saw several women dressed in robes and huge, pointed black hats. One woman had a green face, with a wart on a nose that looked sharp enough to open a wound. They were all sweeping their stoops with brooms made of unevenly cut reeds, broken in places, missing bristles in giant patches. They paused their sweeping to look up at Edward from under their shriveled brows.

In the middle of the town, beside a square and in front of an enormous home, was what appeared to be the top of a huge vine. Edward passed it, mystified. When he got closer, he realized that the vine descended past street level and into the tops of clouds below. The house behind the plant had a gargantuan door and massive windows. Edward, who was from what was usually considered a race of large beings, felt positively dwarfed. He hurried past, somehow sure that the large house meant trouble, and felt his heart double its beat when he saw the home's occupant through the window: an enormous giant, its face dumb but menacing.

He was looking to the side, trotting ahead and trying to keep his hooves quiet on the cobblestones, when he ran into another pedestrian. He turned and almost recoiled. It was the wolf Edward had seen in the other village — the sun-drenched, happy-go-lucky village on the far side of the dark path — following the girl in the red cloak and carrying the basket. The wolf, when seen up close, was huge. It stood upright, like a human, and was covered in gray hair that protruded from its skin in thick, unruly tufts. Edward looked up to apologize and saw that its eyes were a deep yellow, cut with thin slits in their shining centers, framing a mouth that was half-open in a snarl, saliva dripping from long, off-white fangs.

“Excuse me,” said Edward.

The wolf stood and breathed heavily, its exhalations coming out like an idle growl. Its breath was terrible — like something dead and decaying. In the sparse light of the village, everything in the wolf’s hair-covered face was sharp, hooded shadows.

He started to take a step, and the thing inhaled, still watching him. The inhale made a noise like an angry snort. A line of drool dripped from its mouth to land on Edward’s back. A giant, clawed paw came up. Edward tensed to run, but the wolf’s paw was on him before he could, wiping at the pool of dripped saliva.

“I’m so sorry,” the wolf said in a strangely civilized voice, almost like that of a proper unicorn. Its paw went into a pouch at its waist, pulled out a muted swatch of blue fabric, and dabbed at Edward’s back as if swabbing glass.

Edward was so shocked that at first he nearly ran. He looked at the wolf and saw that its face was still snarling. He said, “Um ... no problem?”

“I didn’t see you there,” said the wolf, acting like he was the one who’d run into Edward. “I’ve been distracted.”

Edward looked again at the great wolf’s face. Its gums mostly covered its teeth, but the snarl was still apparent. Those big yellow eyes were on him, boring directly through his skin. A breeze rustled, and the trees chattered with the stir of bones. The light waned further (Edward realized that the source appeared to be a very bright moon, just then partially obscured by a dark cloud), and his hair stood on end. Through the window, the giant turned, came to the sill, and peered out with stupid menace.

Before he could think, Edward said, “Please don’t hurt me.” It was a strange thing to say. It was unlikely that anything here could kill him, but pain was different. A unicorn could heal just fine, but that didn’t make getting raked open with razor-sharp claws any fun.

“*Hurt you?*” The wolf looked both offended and annoyed. “Why would I hurt you?”

“I thought you were angry.”

The wolf looked down, all teeth and yellow eyes. That strangely proper voice came out of the murderous mouth. “Oh, I see. It’s because I’m a wolf, isn’t it? I’m the bad guy, right? You’re just like that sheriff today.” He shook his head, exasperated.

“What sheriff?” Edward remembered how the wolf had been following the girl earlier, and wondered if he’d been caught doing something untoward. He added, “I saw you earlier. Are you talking about when you were stalking that girl in the red cloak?”

“*Stalking?*” The wolf laughed. “Oh, that’s rich. Listen, there’s a bakery I like in that village, and they make these wonderful little tarts. *Every. Single. Week*, that girl right there beats me to it and buys them all. She’s able to do it every week because I have to pass her grammy’s house, and Grammy watches through her window until she sees me coming, then shouts down to the girl so she can run around and get there ahead of me. And I get it; they’re excellent tarts. But can’t she leave just a few?”

“You were following that girl because she had tarts you wanted?”

“Well, I wanted to explain to her that if she wanted to mess with me, that was her business, but that today was different. I figured she’d mayhap have some compassion, given that the tarts I wanted were for a funeral.”

“Funeral?”

“You don’t know?” The wolf shook its great and frightening head. “Of course you wouldn’t. You’re not from around here, are you?” The wolf extended a clawed paw ahead and to the right. “Delores’s funeral is today. You wouldn’t know her, but she was a grand old lady. She had two passions: decorating and cooking desserts. Desserts are pretty much all she ate, and all she made for everyone around here. Candy, too. She made the most magnificent candy. Everyone loved Delores. But those tarts, see, they were her favorite too. She had magic, so she could get to the bakery ahead of that little sneak and buy them, but in the past few months she’d been getting slower and more feeble, and so I started running some of her errands. The one I could never nail was that tart errand, because of the game the girl and her grammy think it’s so funny to play. Delores, she said it was no big deal. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself, Henry,’ she’d say. ‘You were born with enough of a cross to bear.’ Then she’d laugh this dry little laugh and smile this understated, dry little smile. But it always bothered me — at first because the girl and her grammy seemed to snag those tarts each Sunday just because they thought it was funny to mess with the big, bad wolf from the other village, then later because they were depriving Delores through me as well — and still I mostly let it go. Curse of my timid personality, I suppose. Delores said I should be more assertive. ‘Big boy like you?’ she’d say. ‘You could just *take* those tarts from her, and she

wouldn't have a thing to say.' But that's not how I am. It's not how Delores was, either. She used to say things like that — used to tell kids that she'd eat them, too." The wolf laughed, lost in nostalgia. "But she wouldn't hurt a fly, and knew I wouldn't either. So we let the little brat take all the tarts, but today ... well, my anger got the best of me."

"What happened?" Edward asked. He was getting used to the wolf's face. It was terrifying, but his quaint story quickly drained most of the terror. His fangs were merely features beneath his conversant lip; drooling was an unfortunate medical condition he couldn't help; his eyes were simply intense orbs that happened to be yellow. Still Edward's skin bristled, and still his eyes kept glancing toward the house with the giant inside, with the strange top of a vine — or was it a stalk? — protruding from below and into the giant's front yard.

"I caught up with her and offered to buy the tarts. I tried to explain the situation, but when she realized whose funeral I was getting all teary about, she laughed at me and skipped off even faster. She said that Delores had gotten what she deserved. So I followed her again, and caught up with her in the woods, just after going over the river. She yelled back at me, chanting 'Burn witch, burn!' like a cruel little brat. So I ran past her, figuring I could reason with her grammy. Well, Grammy was away, so I got this idea, and I went into Grammy's house, and I put on her housecoat and got into her bed and ..."

"Wait," said Edward. "You thought you could pass for a human woman just by putting on a coat?"

"And a hat!" the wolf blurted, defensive. His shoulders slumped, and he said, "Okay, so it wasn't one of my better ideas. But this thing with Delores ... it has me all confused. Of course the minute Goldie came in and saw me, she just snorted laughter and yelled for the sheriff. After my wrists were bound and he was hauling me out, the girl was sitting in a chair by the door, *shoving* tarts into her mouth, and raining crumbs on the floor. And this little brat, she looks at me still in her grammy's housecoat and says, 'What big eyes you have, Grammy,' and I just kind of snapped and yelled back at her, '*The better to poop on you with!*' which didn't even make sense, seeing as my eyes don't do that, but it just kind of came out. That didn't help me with the sheriff, and he used it as justification to keep me on grounds of harassment — made worse by my sneaking into her grammy's house and putting on her clothes ... well, you get the idea."

Edward wasn't sure what to say. He really just wanted to move on, but the wolf's story intrigued him. When he'd seen the wolf (*Henry*, he reminded himself) earlier, he'd assumed he was harassing the girl and would probably catch her in the shadows and kill her. But the way the wolf told the story now was kind of impossible to doubt.

"It's been a rough week," said Henry the wolf, now using the blue cloth to dab at his watering eyes. He stowed the cloth and shook his head, as if to clear it. "I haven't been myself. Snapping like that. It hasn't helped my reputation on the other side of the path. *Any* of our reputations, really. That little stunt set us way back." He blinked, then sighed. "Oh well. It is what it is."

"What happened to Delores?" said Edward.

"Well, that's the other thing with Goldie. She knew the kids. The kids with the accents?" He looked at Edward then gave another shake of his big head, as if chastising himself for continually failing to remember that the unicorn colt knew no assumptions from either village. "Sorry. They all hung together. They were terrors. Most of the kids from the village, they were afraid of Delores. And the other magic-users here too; they called them witches. It was totally unfounded, the kids being afraid — just because a woman lives alone and doesn't *have* children doesn't mean she *hates* children, though those town kids didn't make it easy for them to do otherwise sometimes — but they *were* afraid most of the time, and it was useful in a way because it kept them from bothering us. But not Goldie and her friends. It was almost like they wanted to torture the women here. Their parents are probably to blame; I don't know. But they used to come here and vandalize Delores's house ... "

"They'd just come in and break windows?" Edward, who had plenty of unicorn pride, found this reprehensible. A being's home was sacred. He couldn't imagine bad colts and fillies coming to his grammy and grappy's haven to defile it. Trying blushed him with anger.

"Well, in a way it's hard to blame them," said Henry. The wolf bobbed his head, apparently trying to understand the intruding children's motivations. "See, like I said, Delores was this great cook. She made the most amazing pastries and candies, and believe me, all of us benefitted." The wolf patted his stomach. "But she was also an artist at heart, so she loved to decorate and keep her house. And that, in part, is why it was so terrible that those kids wouldn't stay away — because Delores, out of all of

us, really cared about her house. But anyway, she liked to make candies and decorate her home, and one year she had this amazing idea. She decided to make her house *out of* the things she baked, combining her passions. It took Delores a year, working under a protective spell to keep weather from her roof. She painstakingly baked gingerbread squares and then mortared them together with royal icing to make the walls. She created giant, hand-twisted candy canes as her corner supports and lampposts. She decorated with peppermint twists and gumdrops and chocolates. Her house was beautiful — a never-ending work in progress — and she was always tweaking here or there, adding new rooms or outbuildings, refreshing pieces that had gone stale. It was her passion.”

The wolf’s eyes — which Edward was surprised to realize he’d started to think of as soft — grew cold and hard. “But the kids? They didn’t care about all the hard work Delores put into her home or baking. They didn’t bother to talk to her or to be nice. Because Delores? She was a great lady. If Goldie and Greta and Hans had just asked, she would have given them all the candy they wanted. Because that’s why she made it, you understand: to share. She used to say, ‘Baking is love, and love is nothing till shared.’ But the kids never even tried! To them, she was the wicked witch — wicked, apparently, because she had that big hat and didn’t conform to *their* perception of beauty. Delores wasn’t exactly main-stage pretty. She had horrible skin, with a tinge from living here without a lot of light, and couldn’t ever free her face from a few of her more unfortunate warts. The kids, they decided it was better — justified, mayhap — to steal from the witch.” Henry’s lip curled, showing those big, white fangs. “So they came here, over and over and over, and yanked chunks from her walls. Stole the chocolate drops above her door. Walked off once with an entire mailbox. She was constantly doing repairs. We encouraged her to contact the authorities, but no one would listen to the likes of us.”

“They don’t like you?” said Edward.

“I wish it were that simple,” the wolf said. “They don’t understand us. It’s like we’re not even speaking the same language.” He pointed to the giant’s house. “Paul there, his beanstalk’s other end is in town. Don’t ask; it’s a magic arrangement I don’t understand. But for the longest time, he’s had problems with people climbing the stalk, going into his house, and taking his gold. Just taking it! But when he went to the sheriff, they said, ‘Well, you must have stolen it to begin with.’ Just like that! They didn’t

even investigate. Because if a giant has wealth, he must have stolen it, right?” Henry shook his head. “Complaining about the children did no good. Believe me; I’ve tried, with the tarts. And they just say, ‘Oh, I’m sure a big, bad wolf like you can solve a tiff with a little girl.’ But it’s not like that. They’re allowed to do whatever they want.

“Anyway, a week ago, the kids came back while Delores was out. Just Hans and Greta, whose father ... well, I won’t tell you what I’ve heard about *that* sack of garbage.” Henry shook his head. “But the thing is, they’re greedy little kids, but stupid, too. Goldie is their ringleader, and without her along to mastermind, these two little idiots just gorged and gorged, with no thought to moderation or knowing when enough was enough. We think they were in Delores’s house alone for two or three hours before she finally came home. That was enough time for them to half destroy everything she had built. They ate most of her furniture. They used their fat little hands to grub sugar coating from most of the walls. They ate a clock — a clock! — that Delores had painstakingly created from tiny pieces of spun sugar. They must have gorged until they were sick a few times, because they seemed to have thrown up all over the place too. But did that stop them? No, they kept on eating, and eating. Eating like locusts. Delores came home to find her house in shambles.”

Edward gasped. The giant reappeared in the window. Looking at him now, the unicorn realized that he didn’t look menacing. He just looked large.

“Exactly,” Henry continued. “Delores was with a friend, but the kids didn’t care that there were two adults to face off against them. The girls started yelling, but Hans and Greta just laughed, and threw up some more, and ate some more. Then, from what Gloria says, Delores just started throwing things at the kids — but because everything in the house was edible, the kids just caught what she threw and ate it, laughing, like it was all one hilarious game. I guess it went bad when Delores threw open the door of her enormous oven and said, ‘You little brats! I’m going to cook you to repair my walls!’ It was the stupidest thing to say — totally Delores — but the kids somehow (this is their story, anyway) thought it was a real threat. They tackled her and shoved her into the oven, which they then closed and wedged shut. Gloria ran forward, tripped over something, and didn’t wake up until after ... after ... ”

Edward realized with shock that the Big Bad Wolf was going to cry. He turned, to give the wolf privacy to compose himself. Henry did, and returned to the conversation with a brisk, "Well." His one word said that what had happened had happened, and that he'd made his peace, though clearly he hadn't.

"And the authorities?" said Edward.

Henry shrugged. "Wicked witch who lives in the spooky forest threatens to cook charming local children. Who could blame them for defending themselves?"



CHAPTER 18

THE FUNERAL

Edward didn't have the heart to ask Henry if he knew how to leave the Dark Forest, or the heart to ask anyone else in any of the other houses. The dark neighborhood no longer seemed as ominous as it had, but Edward still felt that he had to keep moving. The strange cat's warning still rang in his ears, and this was another reality he wanted to be careful not to vanish into — not because it was evil or dark, but because it was besieged and sad.

He'd misjudged the dark. He'd felt threatened on arrival — including by women in dark, pointed hats — when in reality the neighborhood was probably more afraid of him. They had their ways and kept to themselves, and here came another denizen of the white. Who knew what they might have feared? Unicorns who could spin magic (they didn't know that he couldn't) were incredibly powerful. For all the villagers knew, mayhap Edward had been sent to clear the Dark Forest's blight. Mayhap some powerful authority had sent him in to eliminate them all, in the name of everything good and clean.

Edward was particularly troubled by how the wolf had seen him immediately, and how subsequent villagers — all of whom regarded him with looks of suspicion — had stared into his core. Earlier, he'd felt invisible. Had the first creatures he'd passed since leaving the cat been indifferent? Or had they actually not been able to see, feel, or hear him? Edward wasn't sure. But he was present now, and somehow that seemed ominous. He had to keep moving. This wasn't his place. He had to reach Mead. He was becoming increasingly certain that whatever had happened in what the cat had called a "cataclysm" — what he'd said had made the world "soft" — was temporary. The cat had suggested that things between the worlds would heal in time. Edward had no idea how long that might take but was pretty sure what would happen if he didn't find Mead before then. He didn't want to be in the wrong place when barriers began snapping back into place.

He cut through the village, finding it larger than expected. He saw creatures similar to ghryst and other dark Mead specters in houses that appeared to be made of smoke, but instead of flinching back, the unicorn regarded them with interest. There was, upon a massive, mountainous hill

overlooking the village, an enormous black tree with knobby branches that appeared to have been twisted into knots. The tree had bearing; it was like a supreme being looking down as both protector and overlord. There was a huge river around its base, seeming to start at the tree itself. Even across the distance, Edward's unicorn eyes could see that the river's level had diminished. There was a high-water line well above the river's current level as if it once flowed in a mighty torrent before its flow had slowed.

It took Edward hours to traverse the village, and at times he was certain he'd walked in circles. He saw the same houses again and again, but each time he did, the unicorn was reasonably sure that there were different houses to the sides, or that the trees and rocky outcroppings had somehow changed. Every time he thought he saw something similar, Edward would look back and wonder if he should retrace his steps. But every time, he convinced himself that even though a house looked uniquely familiar, those around it looked equally unrecognizable. He kept walking, pushing through the fog of a dreary nightmare, seeing the same specters over and over.

Edward started to worry. The unicorn was putting one hoof in front of the other, as the cat had instructed, and wasn't stopping to immerse himself into the village. But had he already gone too far? Had the time he'd spent talking to the wolf — the time, he realized, that he'd taken to understand where he was and how he might be able to fit in if needed — cost him his independent existence? Should he have remained cold and indifferent, proving himself (to what or whom, he couldn't imagine) different from this place? Had the world begun to solidify? The tree on the mountain was seldom out of sight, and Edward found his eyes repeatedly returning to the small river at its base. The tree reminded him of the one in Grammy and Grappy's story. The river made him think of Mead's floodwaters. Had something been breached between light and dark, as in Mead? If so, was that breach healing, as evidenced by the river's thinning flow?

The Dark Forest stretched on and on and on. Dark roads. Familiar houses. Recurring trees. Yet Edward's sense of direction was fairly good, and the unicorn had been watching what seemed to be an ever-present full moon. It hadn't changed positions relative to his forward-marching nose. So why was the forest not ending, and why was Edward sure he was marching past the same places on repeat?

He arrived at a cemetery. He'd seen one very much like it several times before, always on the road's left, with the three forward-canted tombstones

at the front and the one split down the middle beside them. This time, the cemetery was different. It was full of people.

People included all forms of creatures, all of whom were focused on a slim black coffin made of what appeared to be burned wood. The thing was dull and unimpressive, hanging in the group's middle like a hole in the night. It stood beside but not above a large, rough-hewn hole in the ground with sides that were smooth and scooped rather than straight and cut. The grave looked like a crater — plenty deep but inexpertly dug and entirely too wide at the top. As Edward walked forward, drawing no attention, he noticed that what he'd taken to be a monument at the group's rear was actually the giant, Paul. His head was obscured by a large tree. Looking up at the giant's hands, which dangled between bent knees as he sat on the cemetery ground, Edward saw that his fingers and palms were covered with dirt.

At the head of the group around the grave was a very tall scarecrow with the head of a pumpkin. The pumpkin was carved with a horrible face, all angles and sharp teeth. The carved grin stretched as high as the triangular eyes and held no humor. The scarecrow man was stuffed into a ratty black formal human suit. Tufts of straw protruded from its cuffs at the ankles and wrists. Edward listened for a few minutes before walking forward — long enough to understand that the scarecrow was leading the dark service and that the service, as suspected, was for Henry's friend Delores.

Edward stood where he was, five or ten paces back from the gathering — the gathering, which, he realized, had an opening at its back where he could slot into perfectly as if it had been left specifically for him. He turned his head and glanced at the road then back at the funeral. The unicorn somehow felt it would be right to attend but didn't want to. Doing so might make him more a part of this dark world, and he had to get home.

He looked again at the road and was suddenly sure he could walk that road forever and never leave the forest. It had him already. He could only leave if he fought. And to fight, he needed help.

Edward walked forward. Henry the wolf was to his right, and as Edward stepped into place, the wolf turned toward him and nodded as if to thank him for coming. To his left was a man in a green hat with a very long brim. His clothes were multicolored, which seemed strange attire for a funeral. Although this was the unicorn's first human funeral (assuming

Delores was human), he had to admit he didn't know the standard etiquette. The man had a large nose, deeply pitted olive skin, and grave brown eyes peering out from beneath his long hat. As Edward settled, the man gave him one long, unabashed look — the appraising eyes of someone who doesn't worry about the impression he might be giving because no one questioned his right to do as he pleased.

"We do not have to understand what happened to our friend Delores," said the preacher pumpkin, standing across the large, untidy grave. "We do not have to make peace with it. It is not our place to make peace. In the eyes of those who did this, it is our place to make discord. Neither is correct. They are not bad to have done this, and we are not bad to have inspired their hatred. We are not the dark. They are not the light. We are who we are. And Delores was who she was. To the children of the village across the path, she was a witch. To us, she was merely a woman. To the children, she was a target and victim. To us, she was a friend. None of that matters. When a life ends, the magic that animated that life returns to that place whence it came, and those impressions no longer matter. All that matters is legacy. What was Delores to all of you? What can you learn from her life? And how will the world be different for her having been here? None of us knows. Each of us is like a ripple in a pond. Deep in the downstream of time it may — or may not — be apparent how and why we mattered. But each of us *does* matter — and each of us here, on this side of the path, matters just as those on the other side."

The scarecrow man sighed, apparently bringing breath into lungs made of straw and cornhusks. From the corner of Edward's side-facing eye, he saw the man with the hat and pitted skin cast him with another appraising look.

"We do not know why we are here," said the scarecrow. "We do not know if it is by provenance or a trick of luck. There are some who say we are brought here by the intention of others — of those beyond our knowledge who assembled us here for reasons they know and do not share. There are those who say that when an existence here ends, it is merely a transition." He pointed at the casket, and Edward saw that his hand was composed of twisted sticks, all of them black. His pointer was a knotted twig with a sheered end.

"We will miss Delores but must understand that we *cannot* understand what this husk of body in a wooden box actually is. Is it evidence that the

energy that animated her has moved on? Or does it simply mean an end? We know that energy does not go away. It merely moves to other places. So where did Delores's go? To the air? To the ground? Did it fragment? Or is it possible that it remains whole? None of us can know. We know only that it's gone, but where it's gone depends on what we truly are while here. Are we clusters of magic that dissipate back into larger magic once done? Or if we're here by the intention of our creators, do we return to them? What happens when a dream is no longer dreamed?"

Several of the dark figures sniffled around the grave. The man to Edward's side was still glancing over. Edward wanted to tell him to mind his own business and be more respectful. The thought bothered him, just as the preacher's oratory was bothering him. What was this place? Was it really possible that the more respect and attention Edward gave to the world's proceedings, the more he became part of it? Was he giving his energy permission to remain? It was a dangerous question, if everything borrowed magic from the Wellspring, as Grappy had said. If energy's borrowed, why would that energy care what arbitrary cluster it formed, and in which place?

Unbidden and unwanted, one of the cat's questions flitted into Edward's mind: *Do you believe you are real?*

The preacher concluded the service, pausing at the end, stepping toward the burned black coffin and running his hand of sticks across the top. The other mourners did the same, forming a line by the coffin, each walking by and dragging a single hand across the top. Edward couldn't do that when it was his turn, so he nudged it with his nose as he'd seen several other creatures and animals do. The coffin was thick with soot and left a temporary mark on his nose. As the crowd dispersed, he noticed they all had black soot on their fingers and that all were, as they walked away, using identical white swatches to wipe themselves clean. As they walked through the cemetery gate, they tossed the cloths into a roaring barrel of fire.

"You're not supposed to be here," said a deep, gravely voice.

Edward turned. He saw the man with the pitted skin and green hat standing beside him. He was wiping soot from his fingers, but whereas the others did so reverently, the man with the hat did so as if cleaning after an unpleasant task. He finished then pushed his scrap of cloth into a short man's hand as he passed. The short man looked up, saw who'd given it to

him, put the other man's cloth together with his own, and proceeded toward the burning barrel to deposit them both.

"Who are you?" said Edward, annoyed.

"A man who gets things places," he said, brushing his hands on his multicolored pants and leaving smudges of sacred soot. "Usually things that shouldn't be where they are. Things others wish were gone."

Edward turned so he was facing the strange man, looking at him sidelong with his equine eyes. He'd already prepared for the man addressing him; the way he'd assessed the unicorn throughout the funeral made it seem like he would. The glances were annoying and intrusive. The way the man hadn't paid attention to the service was disrespectful and insulting. Edward had already decided he didn't like the man at all. And what's more, the unicorn was tired of feeling at the effect of other things. He'd boarded the ark without question, mainly because Noah had asked him to. A strange prophetic cat had told him about the world as if Edward were a simpleton who knew nothing rather than a representative of a progenitor race. He'd been shoved from place to place by circumstance, understanding nothing and only wanting to get home. But he was through feeling like a weak, frightened colt. He had braved multiple worlds and walked through the darkest of dark without harm. He'd be dagged if some idiot in a pointy hat could intimidate him.

"What if I want to stay?" said Edward.

"You can't stay. You aren't supposed to be here."

"And what is it to you?"

The man shook his head. "You are an intrusive presence here, unicorn. This place is dark. It embraces the dark. What do you know about the dark? What do *any* of you know about the dark?"

Edward realized the man must know about unicorns to make a statement like that. Did it mean they were closer to Mead than he'd thought? Or were there unicorns in other worlds? Or — and this one was troubling — had the man in front of him been to Mead before?

"We know the dark," Edward said. "And if you can be here, so can I. I will not be led." But that was wrong. The unicorn *wanted* to leave.

"You don't," said the man. "In all of human history, you haven't. Your attitude toward us has always proved it. You marched on The Realm. You are the great white, and they are the black — that's what you think. And you can't abide it."

“We never marched on The Realm,” said Edward. Behind the unicorn’s urge to defend himself, he wanted to know what the man was talking about. Was he from The Realm? If so, how could he be? The humans’ Realm was in the world of Mead, but the man’s manner was so belligerent, Edward couldn’t surrender his guard enough to ask.

The man shook his head. “You have marched many times and killed to enforce your superior will. You’ve battled many human cities — covertly if not overtly, stealing their magic away.”

But there was only one human city — in the world of The Realm, anyway. What other groupings could possibly be considered “cities”? And how could the man think unicorns had marched? They’d kept their distance. Ironically, marching would be a step in the right direction, according to Grappy. It represented conflict, which Grappy had said was good, and would mean humans and unicorns finally engaging with one another. The two species hadn’t so much as spoken outside of isolated talks since Grappy had first tried. The idea of open battle was preposterous.

“Get away from me,” said Edward. “Or I’ll trample you.”

The man shook his head. “Something your size? I don’t think so. I doubt you can do magic, either.” He spread his arms wide, and Edward realized with surprise that the odd man was actually looking for a fight. “Go ahead, light-bearer. Strike me down. Stuff me into the mud like the dark-spirited vermin I am.”

Edward started to walk away.

“Not that way, you fool,” said the man.

“What do you care where I go?”

“I want you out of my world!” he blurted.

Edward stopped then turned completely around. The man had surprised himself but recovered quickly, again spreading his arms wide. The gesture said, *What are you going to do?*

“What?”

“This is a place for dark things. You are not welcome.”

Edward shook his head. After turning, he was facing back toward the grave site and saw that only the giant had stayed behind. He’d lowered the coffin into the hold and was using his massive hands to pile the dirt.

“It’s interesting,” said Edward. “Before you barged into my life, I was thinking that this place has welcomed me more than any of the light places

I've seen on my trip. I realized that dark and light really aren't that different. But *you*? You have spoiled it all."

Edward felt a hand on his back. The hand seemed to be tipped in claws. He turned and saw the wolf, Henry, standing upright beside him.

"Don't let him sour your opinion of us," Henry said. "This attitude is why Delores died. We're just the big, dark bad guys over here, aren't we?" He turned to the man in the hat. "Leave him alone, Saul. We've had enough prejudice and death."

The man named Saul nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes we have, haven't we? Just like what has been done to humans in my home city by the righteous unicorn race, eager to rid the world of those falling low from their standards."

The wolf shook his head. He spoke to Edward. "He wasn't always like this."

Edward pushed past the insults and insinuations. He looked at the man in the hat. "Where is your home?"

"The Realm."

"You know how to get to there?"

He half nodded. "I used to. Mayhap I still do. It's been a while, and much has changed."

"Why did you leave?"

He snorted. "When we came back, and our city was decimated ... " He nodded toward the grave site. "Well, let's just say this isn't the first time 'good' has triumphed over 'evil' because *good* thought it knew better."

"You don't know unicorns did it," said Henry.

Saul threw his hands in the air. "Of course it was unicorns! Who else can unleash a flood to cover the world? Who else can fly above the floodwaters while their victims drown? They eyed us for years from afar, and have marched on us since, again and again. We're ... "

Edward cut him off. "You're talking about the flood?"

"As if you don't know."

Edward didn't know at all. He turned to Henry.

Henry nodded, his long fangs visible. He began to explain.

"Saul here has a talent for music. His home city had a problem with rats ... "

"And we don't know what caused that particular plague either," the man said, eyeing Edward.

“And Saul was called on to lead rats from the city. But when he returned, the city was flooded. More than flooded. He was in a river city when it happened. He found a boat and somehow ended up here.”

“There was no ‘somehow’ about it,” said Saul, sounding insulted. “I know where things are. I know how to open doors. It’s my talent.”

“His talent is *music*,” said Henry, glancing at Saul.

Saul turned his palms upward as if to say he didn’t see the difference.

“Anyway,” said Henry, “Saul didn’t used to be like this. He came here, and he *became* here. The longer he was here, the more ... well, the more *like he is* ... he became. But he’s not supposed to be here either, so don’t buy into his crap that you’re not supposed to be.”

“I’m supposed to be here now,” said Saul, talking to Henry. “But this ... unicorn? He’s not like us. He has to go.”

Edward looked at the road. He’d actually *been* on his way out — of town as well as the conversation — when Saul had stopped him by saying that he was going the wrong way. So what was the argument? Edward wanted to get out of the Dark Forest; he’d been trying for hours before he’d encountered the funeral. Saul wanted him out of the Dark Forest because he was too light to be inside it and was, apparently, sullyng the dark. It didn’t matter that they didn’t like each other. They shared a goal. To embrace it they merely had to get out of one another’s way.

“I want to go,” Edward said. “Believe me.”

“But not because you’re being chased out,” Henry interjected.

“Because I want to go home.” Again, Edward glanced toward the road.

“I keep telling you that’s not the way,” Saul said, shaking his head at Edward’s idiocy.

He fought his annoyance. “Fine. So what is the way?”

Saul reached into the folds of his multicolored outfit and pulled out a small alloy pipe with holes dotting the length. He held one end near his mouth and positioned his fingers over the holes, as if getting ready to play.

“This is,” he said.



CHAPTER 19

THE PIED PIPER

“I don’t like you.”

Edward stopped. Saul the piper had suddenly stopped playing his small instrument, stopping as if he’d reached an obstruction in the road.

“I know,” said Edward. “I don’t particularly like you either.”

“I need you to understand,” said the piper. “This might look like I’m helping you, but I’m really helping myself by getting you out of here.”

They had been walking together for mayhap half the time Edward had walked around the village in circles alone. Only now, with Saul leading the way and playing his small pipe, they were making headway. The overarching dark branches had opened up, and there were a few dead leaves clinging to them. The cinders beneath Edward’s hooves had turned into packed dirt. There were fewer ominous sounds in the dark, and the noises in general had become lighter and fuller. Saul’s pipe had sounded stuffed when they’d begun, but now it had a crisper quality as if the air had grown thinner.

As they walked, Edward had even seen Saul’s demeanor shift. His tread, at the outset, had been heavy and thudding. Their march had been like a procession, and his pipe playing had sounded like a dirge. But as the sky had lightened, so had Saul’s step. Just before he’d stopped playing, Edward had thought he might start skipping. The music he played on his pipe was somehow opening a way out of the Dark Forest — and as that way opened, Saul was opening too. Henry had said that Saul hadn’t always been as surly as he was today, and thinking of Henry’s words now, Edward wondered if the Dark Forest had turned him sour. Saul was human, and he’d been born in The Realm. The Dark Forest wasn’t his true home. Mayhap it had turned *him* dark, feeding his innate anger with its own bile.

“I understand,” said Edward.

Saul looked at the unicorn earnestly, as if warring internally. When he’d first spoken to Edward, his voice had been all hate and vitriol. Now it was almost apologetic as if he still resented Edward’s presence but now wanted Edward to understand why.

“The people in the Dark Forest,” he continued, “were born with a black mark. They’re hated because they embody the darkness.” Edward found

himself thinking of the tree in early Mead, and Grammy's peach. "But if they keep to themselves, they can mostly avoid the sour judgment of those who hate the dark simply because they do not understand it. There are incursions, like with those kids, but they are few and always unwanted. So when you came in ... " He stopped, seemingly unsure how to finish the sentence. It occurred to Edward that the piper might be confronting an unpleasant truth: that he was as guilty of hating Edward because he didn't understand him as the forest's usual interlopers were of hating the dark.

"I understand," Edward repeated.

Saul held his space. Edward patiently waited. Finally the piper turned, returned the instrument to his lips, and again started to play. He walked lightly forward. After a brief period, the sun started shining with a muted, cloud-obscured glow. The scantest of shadows formed. Perhaps subconsciously, Saul finally started to skip.

A while later, Saul took his pipe and slipped it into the folds of his shirt. He allowed Edward to catch up, and when the unicorn did, their eyes more or less at the same height, he looked over and nodded. It was enough to break the last of their ice.

Edward spoke first.

"You don't need to keep playing?"

Saul shook his head. "No. We're out of the Dark Forest."

"So where is this?"

"In between."

"Between where?"

"Hard to say. It might be splitting hairs. I just know where we came from is behind us, and where we're going's ahead."

"Mead," said Edward.

Saul shook his head. "No. It's like I said, I can no longer be sure of the way. I've been around a long time, and something — perhaps some trick of the mind or of this place — makes me impervious to aging. This is a strange place and wasn't accessible before the flood. But when I first walked from the world of Mead and The Realm, leaving was simple. It's not like that now. Now there's a gatekeeper."

"A gatekeeper?"

Saul nodded. "I must warn you: If you're allowed to return to our world, you may be shocked. It's like the trick of aging. This place — with the Dark Forest and light place beyond the path, all of it — is like a capsule.

I've gone back and forth between many places, always as an escort, but the Darkness draws me back. And when I've left with others, to take people and things to the places they should be, I keep finding that more and more time has spilled from forever. When I spoke of marches on The Realm?" Here, he looked apologetically at Edward, clearly conveying that he understood the colt wasn't responsible for his species' actions. "Well, I spoke out of anger and might have been misleading. The marches were after the flood. *Long* after."

"How long?" said Edward.

"I'd rather not say more. Worlds are thin through here, and ... oh, I know how this will sound, but I'll say it anyway ... it's like your thoughts and intentions matter. I suspect I drew myself to the Dark Forest because of how I was thinking when I first arrived. And when I've taken people to see the gatekeeper, some of the things he's said ... " Saul shivered.

"What?"

"I think your expectations might matter. Or your thoughts. Or your ... I don't know ... your soul or something. So I'd rather not say more about where you may or may not be going. Just to be safe."

Edward didn't like how the piper had phrased that. Where he may or may not be going? Paths were simple: You walked down them and arrived at your destination. There was no question of how you might interpret a path. It was what it was.

Yet, this path *was* changing more and more the farther they walked. Edward had noticed the sun peeking out as they left the Dark Forest, but it was apparently a false start. The sun wasn't rising more, but they also weren't retreating into darkness. Instead, the sky above had become an almost totally uniform overcast. They could be inside a giant indoor dome, so even was the color. Edward's gaze fell to the trees as tendrils of fog curled between them. It might have felt ominous a few days before, but Edward had come from the Dark Forest — a place that made everything seem bright and cheery. He felt no fear while watching the fog. Merely uncertain.

Saul slowed ahead. He looked back at the unicorn colt.

"Don't," he said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't wonder." The piper pointed at the fog. "You see what's happening." He shook his head. "I shouldn't have said anything. Now

you're doubting and uncertain. Don't let that happen. Remember: You're going home. To Mead."

Edward caught movement from the corner of his eye. The fog had formed a snakelike tentacle ten steps ahead. It twitched upward like an animal hearing a noise as the unicorn noticed it. The fog retreated slightly then, as Edward watched.

"You said I wasn't going to Mead."

"But that's where you want to end up, right? You could be going to Mead." Saul sounded nervous, his manner filled with fresh trepidation. It was astonishing to think that this was the same man who'd confronted him at the funeral. The man with him now had gone from charitably amiable to helpful to ominous, and was now edging skittish. Mayhap their surroundings responded to mood, but it seemed to Edward that the mood, in turn, caused Saul to respond.

"Could be going to Mead?"

"Think of Mead, unicorn. Think of this as a path between here and there. Because if you do, it may be that. And if you don't, it cannot be."

It sounded like a riddle.

Edward didn't like how a growing number of tentacles were appearing from the fog to obscure their path. He looked at the piper, deciding. He thought about Mead as it was before the flood. He remembered his ammy and appy, the knoll where he tried (and failed) to fly. The green of the grass. The scent. The ripe trees, swollen with fruit.

The path's sharpness returned to the distance, the fog receded, and overhead, it even seemed that the sun was trying to bloom.

The piper exhaled. He looked at Edward, seeming to silently urge the unicorn to ask nothing. Edward kept thinking of Mead. What was ahead, in one way or another, must be home.

"Where exactly are we going, Saul? Besides Mead, I mean."

"To the gatekeeper."

"Why?"

"For judgment."

Edward didn't like that at all. He was a unicorn. His previously rock-solid pride had taken a beating through his journey, but it was still there below the surface. No one could judge him. Unicorns weren't for others to lay their thoughts and weights upon.

"Judged how?"

“You will see.”

“And what will he decide?”

“Where you go. If you go.”

“*If* I go?”

The piper shook his head. “I shouldn’t say more.”

“Well, who *is* this gatekeeper?” Edward insisted. He wasn’t precisely asking for the keeper’s identity. He was asking just who this unseen person thought he was.

“The Sandman,” Saul said.

Edward was about to ask further, but a small, tan-and-gray striped creature skittered into the path. A lizard of some sort, like a tiny crocodile with huge black eyes and a pink belly. On its face was what looked like a vague smile.

“*Saaaand*,” the creature purred, its mouth opening to reveal two fangs and a pink palate.

The piper stopped, keeping his distance. The thing in the path was no bigger than three apples lined end to end. Edward could crush it with a hoof, but Saul was acting as if it might leap up and strike them dead. Edward resisted the urge to comment or ask questions. Saul had walked this path many times. Whatever the thing was, he’d surely encountered it before. His reaction, whether the unicorn understood it or not, would be correct.

The creature waddled to the path’s side, moving like a beetle when it ran but looking uncertain and clumsy when going slow. Edward watched it approach the base of a tree and then turn to look at them. Its massive black eyes made it look like it wore a bandit’s mask.

“What is that thing doing?” Edward asked. It seemed to be waiting for something.

“It’s different every time,” Saul said.

The tiny crocodile looked toward the tree then toward them. Its mouth opened and in that same purring voice said, “*Sand path.*”

There was a swirl of brown, and the tree behind the thing shimmered out of existence. In the tree’s place was suddenly a narrow path of pure white sand. The creature gave them a final look and waddled down the path, out of sight.

“Do we follow?” Edward looked toward Saul. It was difficult, in the moment, to believe that the piper had ferried travelers this way before — and, if Saul’s implications were to be believed, that he’d done so many

times. He looked terrified. If they were supposed to follow the sand path, Edward thought he would have to push the man.

Saul said, "We're in the middle. And when you're in the middle, every road is a road to be opened."

"You seem frightened."

Saul swallowed. He looked at the unicorn with large, wide-open eyes. "Whenever I leave the Dark Forest, I'm confident at first. But every time I get here, I'm surprised by how timid I feel."

"What do you need to be confident about?" Edward asked, his eyes still on the path.

"That I'll find my way back."

Saul still wasn't moving. Edward tossed his chin toward the retreating lizard's tiny steps. "So do we follow?"

"We have no choice."

Edward followed Saul's sweeping glance and saw that the path behind them had become a desert, and that there was now nothing but sand in every direction. The only thing to orient Edward — all that told him the direction he'd come from — was his body's position. He didn't want to move because the minute he did he'd have no idea which direction was which. The only thing to finally move him was suspecting that it didn't matter.

Saul's words echoed in his mind: *We're in the middle.*

With the trees gone, they could see the small tan-and-gray creature ahead, plodding across the sand's surface.

The man with the pipe took a step into the sand.

The unicorn followed behind.



CHAPTER 20

ENTER SANDMAN

After a few minutes of walking, Edward's peripheral vision showed a second crocodile-like creature plodding along not far away, heading in the same basic direction. He realized there was another on his other side, and with that, he raised his head to look properly around. The unicorn could see more in the distance heading toward them and several to the sides ahead as if they were all on one spoke of a wheel, heading toward some arbitrary center.

As they walked — and as the small, plodding creatures converged — they neared that arbitrary center. But within a few paces, Edward realized that the center wasn't arbitrary. The sand there was growing into small balloon, which grew tall and swelled, taking shape. A moment later, Edward and Saul found themselves staring at a man who was made entirely of sand and sitting on a sand throne.

The small crocodile-like creatures reached the throne's plinth and started to climb, scaling the sides and back as well as the legs and torso of the man himself. Then the Sandman's features began to resolve and take on color, losing their sand-like appearance. At the end of his transformation he seemed to be a normal human being wearing a dusty tan suit. The suit's color and sandy look was so uniform, it was almost camouflage. Against the desert backdrop, he seemed almost to vanish.

He stood and walked down from the sand throne. The small creatures with their big eye masks and pink bellies, and hissing mouths (they all seemed to be saying "Sand" over and over) continued to climb the Sandman as he descended, skittering up and down his long legs and perching on his shoulders and head. Every once in a while, one would lick from the man's clothing and swallow, as if hungry for the sand itself.

"So," said the Sandman, walking down to stand in front of the piper and unicorn colt, "what have you brought me today, Saul?"

Edward's eyes flicked to Saul. He didn't like the way the Sandman had said that, like a master assessing a servant bringing sacrifices. Was this all a ruse? Had Saul retained his animosity, feigning civility to lure him? Saul himself said he'd led rats from The Realm. Had he now done the same for a unicorn colt — leading him to this odd man in his suit of shifting sand?

“He wishes to see Mead,” said the piper.

The Sandman reached up and tapped his chin. “Mead. In the axial world. Like your world, Saul. If you can’t remain in that world, why should this unicorn?”

Edward’s eye jerked to Saul. The Sandman laughed.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you? He’s a courier — but no, he cannot return to what was once his home. He returns to the forest because that is the home he has *here*. But you see, he cannot pass the test that I’d require of him. His story was too precious for reality. A man with a pipe leading rats from a troubled city? Oh no, I can’t let something like that leave. But you see, my keeping him here was to his benefit. If he had been returned that first time and stayed, he would have gone home to heartbreak and death. Only so many survived the flood, you see.”

Edward found his nerve uncertain in the Sandman’s presence. He struggled for his voice. He barely managed, “Were you the one who caused the flood?”

The Sandman’s head cocked back on his neck. He bellowed laughter. The small creatures climbing his suit looked up, then resumed eating the fabric’s sand. “Oh, no, Edward the Brave. You will be so surprised once you realize who caused it.”

There it was again: *Edward the Brave*.

“Why are you calling me that?”

The Sandman shrugged, pulling a human timepiece from his pocket and swinging it idly on a long chain. Both timepiece and chain appeared to be made entirely from sand. “Well,” he said, “isn’t that your story?” He shrugged more obviously, putting a *not-quite-sure* expression on his face. “But mayhap not yet. Or mayhap a long time ago. Who can say?”

“What are you talking about?”

“All stories are timeless, and yours is no exception. Tales are composed in a time and place, but truths are universal. Was there not good and evil before there were stories to cite them? Was there not a brave being before you? One who echoed your journey?”

Edward stared at the watch, as it started to swing in full circles. He had no clue what the man was saying and didn’t care to know.

“I want to find Mead.”

The Sandman held up his hands and started to pace. The small crocodile creatures had multiplied and were now in piles at his feet, clamoring over

one another as they tried climbing his legs.

“You do, yes,” said the Sandman. “But that is true of every tale. You have heard of Pinocchio? The puppet who wanted to be a real boy?”

“No.”

“Well, mayhap it’s not that time yet,” the Sandman said. “But his journey was the same, only it nested two stories together, one inside the other. Pinocchio was false; he wanted to be real. But once real, he became greedy. He said he wasn’t real even then, and we fought. But I control the doors, and his story was already told.” He took a long look at Edward.

“There is a point where a story is told enough that the story becomes more real than the subject. And beyond that?” He made a fly-away gesture.

“I am not a story.”

“Not yet,” said the Sandman, still pacing. Beside Edward, Saul the piper seemed afraid to move. Right now, the Sandman’s attention was on the unicorn, and if Saul remained still, he seemed to reason, that attention would stay on Edward. “But when will it *become* a story, Edward? I’ve already suggested you have a hero’s journey ahead.” He looked Edward over from hooves to tail to nose, and in the second it took, Edward found himself remembering Grappy’s promise that great responsibilities would fall to him, as a unicorn prince. “You *will* be known as Edward the Brave. You *will* embark on a great quest. The question is, which came first? You the being, or you the character? Because I must say, having heard the story to its end — and no, I won’t spoil a thing — it’s quite a tale. A tale *worthy* of a great epic. But how many things in true life are perfect enough for timeless tales?” He tapped his chin again. “No, Edward the Brave ... I think yours is one for the books. Not one for living.”

Edward couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Literally — it wasn’t remotely believable. The man spoke in riddles. *Was he a story? Did he have the chops to live out his life?* What kinds of questions were these?

“Oh, I can see what you’re thinking, Edward,” the Sandman said. “But you must understand that everything is thought before it is real. Everything that exists in what you consider the *real world* was a figment until someone or something plucked it from the fog and made it real. That goes two ways, and the line between thoughts and reality is whisper thin. Tell me, in the moments before you fall asleep, do you ever feel the presence of something bigger than yourself?”

It was the question his Grappy had asked back at the haven. Edward said, “The Wellspring.”

The Sandman pointed a long finger at the unicorn. His arm’s sudden motion made his sleeve of sand jiggle. A handful of grains sifted to the ground. Crocodiles below scrambled for spillage as if it were somehow different from the rest of the dune sand underhoof. “Exactly that. It’s also the source. You feel it when you fall asleep because that’s when you lose the illusion that there’s a difference between fantasy and reality. You see, young unicorn, the world around you is simply an agreement of sentient beings. If enough living things agree that a thing is real, then it is so. But if those same beings agree that a thing is merely thought — a wisp of imagination held by a fanciful few — then it cannot be. But what *is* real? If you stay here rather than returning to Mead, does that mean that you are not *real*? Or does it merely mean that you are in a different place?”

Edward felt like giving up, like lying down and going to sleep. Mayhap he’d experience the Wellspring — anything to free himself from this doubletalker. The Sandman was worse than the cat. If he was Edward’s only chance at finding Mead, he might as well turn around and return to the forest. Although he wondered if he *could* go back. Saul had seemed terrified that he might not return — not to his own world but to his adopted home in the Dark Forest. Why wouldn’t the Sandman let them return? And more troubling: Where else was there? If you couldn’t go forward or back, were you forever cursed to stay in the desert of limbo?

Edward couldn’t out-riddle the Sandman. He had been holding court longer than the unicorn had been alive, based on what he’d said so far, and had many lifetimes to design riddles that harbored no answer inside them. Edward went for the throat.

“This is stupid,” said Edward. Beside him, Saul gasped. “You’re not deciding whether to let me go. You’re giving a speech. So what is it? Will you let us go forward? Or not? Will you force us back? Or make us stay here forever? Pick one, and be done. There’s no point to your blabbering.”

The Sandman looked genuinely surprised. From the corner of Edward’s eye, he could see the piper’s shock. Apparently, the Sandman wasn’t often surprised.

The Sandman smiled.

“Oh, you *are* a hero in the making, Edward. I see why they will call you Brave. I don’t know whether you are unafraid or entirely stupid, but my

ignorance is cause for celebration. I know all the stories across the worlds, you see, and it's my job to deliver those stories into the minds of those who can retell them and pull something true from their yarn. But it's the cause and the effect. Sometimes it's unclear which is which. I like it when a new story can surprise me. It becomes a story I wish to see play out as intended. But you see, there's still an issue. There are two things to understand. I've told you but one."

Edward nodded, feeling he might have scored a point in their intellectual face-off.

"If you stay here, your story will play itself out as it has, as it already did, forever unchanging, now tethered through what you called the Wellspring. If I let you proceed into the real world, *you* will take control of the story. That might cause it to change, as the axial world is innovation's true source."

Edward shook his head. The Sandman gave a sideways smile.

"Oh, you don't need to understand it. But in the end, that is the dilemma as it's set before me: Do we allow things to remain as they are? Or do we roll the bones and see if there's a way for conscious will to improve them?"

Edward pawed the sand. The small crocodile creatures stirred, glaring at him with their empty black eyes.

"So ... " Edward began.

"You may go on, Edward the Brave," he said. "I, for one, believe in you."

The Sandman held his hand palm up. A miniature sandstorm formed above it, churning like a tiny cyclone. Edward watched the thing pulse as it formed into a tight funnel then dissolved into a billowing cloud. It surged in and out, as if trying to decide what it wanted to be.

"Before you go," he said, "I will tell you something that I have realized while imprisoned here: The worlds are in flux right now, which is the reason you've met me. Walls are so thin that flights of fancy have begun to intermingle with reality. Some say the worlds are ending, but I don't know that I agree. Thoughts are timeless, and I live in a world made from them all. If I can see stories across time, why does it feel like the paths are always open, and not simply open here and now? I don't know it all, Edward. I didn't used to be, and then I became. *Like* a thought. I know only what I know, and not all of the whys or hows. But it seems to me that if this — this intermingling of worlds and the magic within them — is due *only* to the

break that came with the lubrication of water, then why can I see stories across all time? And why am *I* the guardian, seeing as I am not a creature of water?"

The Sandman paused, watching the storm. The pause lasted long enough that Edward thought he might be done, but then he blew gently on the storm and it grew to surround them, swirling in slow motion.

"The two of you are intimately familiar with the Cataclysm that brought water," the Sandman said. "I can't help but believe there will be future breaks that will turn my existence to sense."

"What do you mean?"

The Sandman looked up, his eyes no longer so steely or certain. "Just as the world filled with water," he said, "I believe one day it will fill with sand."



CHAPTER 21

JUST LIKE THAT

Edward continued alone.

The Sandman pointed in a direction that, to Edward's eye, looked exactly the same as the others. He took it. There was no hesitation. He didn't say goodbye to Saul or the Sandman; he didn't so much as look back. His unicorn eyes were on the sides of his head, but Edward looked around as little as possible, focusing on what was more or less before him. The moment felt fragile, as everything had from the moment Saul had stopped playing his pipe, and the feeling Edward had, as he put sand behind him, was like walking on shells. He had the sensation of a narrow escape — not from the Sandman himself but from what he represented — and felt certain, as he walked slowly away, that any small moment of indecision might jinx it.

Soon the fog returned and obscured all that he'd been afraid to look at. He couldn't see far ahead at all; he was totally enclosed in a triple-Edward-length capsule of visibility within the churning fog. And it *was* churning; the unicorn thought he could see indistinct shapes within it as he walked. The world began to feel unreal, and after a few minutes in the fog Edward was already afraid he'd stepped from the Sandman's assigned path and lost his way. He began to imagine things — creatures formed by the fog besieging him from every direction, as if they were the Sandman's unreal fauna who knew Edward had proved himself, and were jealous.

After a short while (and a terrifying moment when Edward's visibility grew so poor that he couldn't see his own hooves), the fog lifted. He could see grass below him. It was flat and featureless owing to the scant light but soon grew greener as the veil parted and Edward could see the swell of land around him. The grass was relatively short and bare in patches as if it had been grazed. There was also a worn path before him where the grass was pressed flat down the middle and had been scoured to dirt in two ruts along either side.

Now that the fog was gone, Edward could see a rolling meadow stretched out in front of him. He heard a rattling behind him and ducked aside to hide (feeling stupid for doing so; he was a unicorn, after all) in case something unknown and ominous had decided to sneak up behind him.

When Edward turned to see the rattling's source, he saw a cart on two large wooden wheels, being pulled by two horses and with a human driver in the seat. The cart was open and held objects that Edward couldn't fully see but that looked like boards and building materials.

The cart rattled by, and Edward, already hidden, let it go. Yar, he could intercept the cart and ask for information, but things here were new. Where was he? Had he crossed worlds again? When night fell, he'd be able to look up at the stars and know for certain, but for now the unicorn had no idea. He remembered the Sandman's ominous words (only that wasn't quite right; they were uncertain more than ominous as if the Sandman himself didn't know what was coming) and felt the moment's fragility.

When the cart and noise were gone, Edward returned his eyes to the path. Where did it go? The cart held a human. Both Saul the piper and the Sandman had implied that The Realm had survived the flood. The Realm was near Grappy's haven, not far from Mead.

It was as good a direction as any, so Edward, feeling his old sense of bubbly optimism after its long, uncertain absence, returned to the path over the green hills.

The fog was now entirely gone, and the sun shone bright on Edward's flanks. He closed his eyes intermittently, feeling sun in the absence of vision. He could almost picture himself in Mead, almost imagine himself running toward the small knoll in the pasture as Ammy and Appy watched and ...

Edward opened his eyes. Something was wrong.

He looked around, unsure what it could be. A moment before, nothing had seemed amiss. He had been on his way home to Mead (mayhap, hopefully), away from the Sandman. Both sun and grass were as beautiful as he had remembered. Only after closing his eyes did Edward realize that something was off.

He closed his eyes again and walked a few steps. It was the sounds that were wrong. Edward opened his eyes, edging panic. Something felt disturbing, but the unicorn saw nothing untoward. Green grass. Peaceful day. He looked to the right, left, forward, back. Up, down, and ...

That was it.

Edward looked down at his hooves, finding them strange. He clapped them on the path, realizing they sounded wrong without knowing why. They were different; that's all he knew.

The unicorn ran.

There was a lake in the valley ahead. Edward ran to its edge, unsure what he might see to explain what he felt. He waded into the water, peeked forward, and nearly fell over at the sight.

His face, in his reflection, appeared longer and more angular. His ears stood taller. In the middle of his forehead, where there had once been a tiny, laughable nubbin, was a magnificent white horn of curled keratin.

Edward stepped back then looked down at his hooves and realized what he was seeing. His hooves looked strange because they were farther from his eyes and sounded strange being farther from his ears. His ankles had less girth relative to their length, and his legs were longer. His chest had broadened, and looking back, he realized his tail had grown long.

Edward was an adult.

Just like that. He hadn't grown up; he'd *become* an older unicorn. And what was more, now that he was paying attention, Edward could feel it continuing to happen. He could feel magic inside him in a way he'd never felt it before. His horn was an antenna, and though he couldn't tell anything specific, Edward was sure he felt the presence of other unicorns. It was like he'd been given a new sense, every bit as present and obvious as sight. He could feel the animals around him, and the feeling expanded with each passing second. He felt life in the grasses and trees. He felt a strong sense of power pulsing in his chest. His wings, too, felt strong; he stretched them to their full length and marveled at their span. Then he folded them, wary of flying when things were so uncertain, and focused again on the magic. It was everywhere like a warm glow. He felt dipped in light, growing brighter through each passing second.

Edward looked at the shore and saw a large rock near the lake's edge. He knew what to do. He imagined the rock lifting into the air. It didn't move, so he shifted his perception: Instead of seeing it lifted in his mind, he pictured a human arm reaching out from his chest and picking it up, turning visualization into intention. The rock began to glow then raised from the ground. It was simple. Easy. With a feeling of exhilaration, Edward imagined himself heaving the rock into the lake. It flew as if it weighed nothing and splashed in the center, sending water gushing into the air.

Edward, already feeling like a different unicorn and not at all like the colt he'd been, marched back toward the path. Strange, but it had to be a

good sign. It had to mean he was back in Mead. Where else would his internal magic feel compelled to sync with nature's?

Edward felt suddenly troubled. Of course his magic would sync with nature's magic, but why had the sync been so dramatic? Unicorn colthood lasted for many human lifetimes. Eons must have passed since he'd left. Yet that was absurd. He couldn't have been gone for more than fifty cycles of day and night, could he?

Edward looked down at his great white chest. How old *was* he? There was no way to tell. As Edward wondered, he remembered what Saul had said about how more time passed each time he'd returned to the Realm, and how there had been unicorn incursions in the intervening years.

Edward shook the thoughts away. Whether the situation made sense or not, he was an adult unicorn now and was, presumably, in what the cat and Sandman had called the "axial world." His *own* world. The *real* world, or at least one of them.

He used his horn to test the magic. Strangely, despite the fractures he'd just walked through, the magic here felt healthy and whole. Where were the rips and cracks? Where was the gaping hole he'd flown through on Appy's back in the storm? During the flood it had seemed as if the world had been shattered. Why didn't he feel the shards now?

Edward shook his head. He'd either find answers to his questions, or he wouldn't. But regardless, he had to keep moving. He couldn't learn more about where and when he was until he started exploring, and until he knew more, he'd be at a disadvantage. He had magic now and a feel for how to use at least some of it (the rock-lifting parts, anyway), but he was still a unicorn out of time. Somehow, he'd had missed many years of this world's history.

He started walking.

He found a road carved through the grass then followed it. Along the road he began to see signs. Some pointed toward The Realm. A few indicated other places that he didn't recognize, and a few steered toward something called "The Great Meadow." Edward wondered how far Mead was, and again if he should fly there. But no, he decided, he shouldn't. Opening his wings would make him too obvious, and his presence in the air would make him a target. He also didn't know if he *could* fly. So he tucked his wings in and continued along the path, putting one hoof in front of the other.

He began to see signs of settlements. He passed a village that was loud with a sound like clanking alloy. The land around him was mostly rolling grassland, but there were low fences carving the land into confined shapes — some of wood, many made of rock. In a few of these enclosed areas, he could see sheep, what were probably cows, and even gaggles of dumb-looking horses. Edward looked at the fences, feeling indignant. They'd clearly been made by humans, to confine what they'd decided was theirs.

The road dead-ended into a sudden field of tall grass. Beside the road's end was a sign that told Edward he'd reached The Great Meadow. The wheel ruts and the trampled grass stopped abruptly, and the grass beyond was pristine. Edward, after a brief glance around, stepped into the grass. He took five steps, then ten. When he looked back, he couldn't see a single bent blade of grass. The place was imperturbable. The carts and walkers probably *did* cross the Meadow — but where did they go next?

Edward looked back, attempted to sight the road's direction. Then he looked ahead, trying to imagine the way it must continue forward.

Then, unsure if he were headed in the right direction, he resumed walking.

After a while longer (and no more certain about his direction or his proximity to The Realm, Mead, or anything else), he heard a small yip from below, at his hooves. He'd just kicked something beneath the grass. He looked down and realized that it was a small man who'd been lying on his back in the middle of the meadow.

The man sprang upright. He was dressed like a human, wearing a tan shirt and plain brown pants. This man, however, only came to Edward's chest and could have passed directly beneath his now-adult belly without so much as ducking.

"Hey!" the little man shouted in a high-pitched voice. "Watch where you're going!"

Edward looked down. He was either growing into a typical adult unicorn's caustic nature, or his long journey through strange and annoying worlds had frayed his nerves. He didn't think to apologize. Instead, Edward found himself irritated at the man for being in his way, and hence said nothing.

"Who and *what* are you?" the man said, now looking up.

"I'm a unicorn. You've never seen a unicorn?"

Irritation drained from the man's face, replaced by what seemed like fatigue. "I'm not from here," he said.

"Where are you from?"

The man shook his head, waving a small hand. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," said Edward, meeting the small man's eyes with one of his own. The magic he sensed in this interloper was somehow different. Magic was like music, and for some reason their two notes were failing to harmonize.

"I hate it here," said the man. "I was sent by the Sandman." He waved his hand again, realizing he'd misspoken. "But you wouldn't know who that is. Just ... never mind."

"I know the Sandman," said Edward, surprised. Something about this encounter was already bothering him. He had just left the Sandman, and the Sandman had said that Edward (who apparently could have been unreal as easily as he could have been real) already had an existing story. And here he'd met someone who had come from the same place? It was too coincidental to be anything other than fiction, just like the presence of the cat in his path or the appearance of the two paths through the woods. The thought made him uneasy.

"You *know* him?" The small man's eyes went bright. "So can you get me back to him?"

"Why would you want to go back to the Sandman?" he asked. Edward couldn't imagine. He himself had barely escaped. Saul had seemed terrified of even being in the man's presence, and he'd said he was afraid each time that he might not return home.

"Because I hate it here!" the man snapped. "It brings out the worst in me! I hate who it's turning me into! And I hate what I see here! These people are nuts, these humans. The Sandman was wrong. I am better as an unreal thing. I was happier in the Dark Forest. Here, all I do is marvel at these humans and how terrible they are."

"Terrible how?" Edward asked.

The man's face pinched as he seemed to decide whether or not to tell Edward something. Finally, confidentially, he said, "Okay, so I'm a trickster, right? I made sense with the witches and the trolls and the giants. I had fun raiding the light village, messing with that big stupid egg, fooling the lasses into giving me their babies. But here?" He shook his head. "It's

too easy. And this is the *central world*, unicorn. This isn't just *one* of the real worlds; it's *the* real world, with a capital R. When I trick the fools in the light village, what does it matter? It's all part of the tale. You expect lasses to make bargains to surrender their babies in stories. But not in reality. Yet they do it every time. The same ruse, I pull over and over again. In the same places! And yet they never catch on. Do you know how many babies I've appropriated since I've been here?"

Edward couldn't make sense of what the tiny man was saying. "Why are you taking babies?"

The little man gave an exasperated shrug. "I don't know. It makes sense in stories. I spin gold; I trick you out of your baby if you can't guess my name. Don't ask. But I always win. *Every. Dagged. Time.* I'm up at my house on the hill, doing my little dance, yelling out that my name is Rumpelstiltskin — because *that* makes sense if I'm supposedly trying to keep a low profile — and they never get it. In the stories, they always do! But not here." He rolled his eyes and put his hands on his hips. "I've gotta tell you, I don't even *want* babies. What am I going to do with a baby? They're as big as I am, and constantly messing their pants. Like I need that aggravation. So I leave them back at the orphanage, and sometimes the lasses figure it out and reclaim their babies, and sometimes — *sometimes!* — I can even manage to do it again: go back to the same lass with the same promise and abduct the same baby. It's terrible."

"Why don't you just stop making bargains to take babies?"

Rumpelstiltskin stepped back specifically so he could stare Edward full in the eye. "Because I'm a story man, dummy."

Edward returned his stare, unsure why this small man seemed so compelling. Even with places to go, the unicorn *was* compelled. There was something here he wanted or needed to do — mayhap even something he was *supposed* to do.

"You're from the Dark Forest?"

"Of course!"

"And you don't want to be here?"

"I don't belong here! The Sandman made a mistake! What exactly am I supposed to be doing? I'm miserable and causing nothing but trouble. Do you think I enjoy causing trouble? It's in my nature, but that doesn't mean I enjoy it. In the unreal world, it does no damage. Here, I think I'm spreading Darkness. Exacerbating stupidity. Making everything worse."

“And that bothers you? You, from the Dark Forest?”

The little man shook his head. “Oh, I don’t know. The Sandman said I’m real. I feel like I’m a story. So which is it? I act like a cliché. But these people here, that’s what they seem to want. So what can I do? And do I really think I know better than the Sandman? But what’s here for me? That’s what I want to ask him. I want to know what good a trickster is in this world — what purpose there is for someone who spins straw into gold, who plays pranks. I feel like I just go back and forth. I tell my tales, then I go. I tell another tale, and I go. They always listen. Always believe it. It’s like they need the Darkness.”

Edward found himself thinking of Grappy. “Maybe they do.”

“Need Darkness? Or tall tales?” He put his hands back on his hips, cocked his head up at Edward, and strode forward. It was a wide-open meadow, and the little man could have gone anywhere — including and especially around Edward — but instead he rammed the unicorn’s legs with malice. “Get out of my way, idiot!”

When Rumpelstiltskin was a few paces behind Edward, the unicorn turned and yelled after him. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the Sandman. Back where you apparently came from. Is that okay with you?”

Edward felt a strange kinship with the jerky little man, so he tried again. “I think you belong here more than you think.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “I feel like I’m spreading a disease.”

“Maybe you’re here to shake things up.”

At this, Rumpelstiltskin’s small features twisted into a mischievous smile. “Oh, that I can do,” he said. “I could tell you some stories.” But then he turned and resumed walking, apparently unconvinced.

Edward whispered after him, too quiet for the little furrow in the tall grass to hear him.

“I’m sure you could.”



CHAPTER 22

ON THE ROAD TO MEAD

A short time after Rumpelstiltskin was no longer moving grass behind him, Edward reached The Great Meadow's edge. The tall grass ended and became shorter and scrubbier; Edward's earlier path resumed as if never interrupted — the same two wheel ruts headed off in the same direction relative to the sun.

He stepped out of the grass. Edward didn't know how much time he'd spent in the meadow, but it felt like forever. There had been human settlements before he'd entered, and he could already see signs of more now that he'd left. He thought of Rumpelstiltskin's stories about bamboozling villagers and wondered if those villagers — this blooming plague of humans that had spread everywhere in his absence — had tried to build in the Great Meadow. Edward had never seen or heard of the Great Meadow but knew it was a unicorn place. A wild, natural, magical place. Had the humans, greedy for their land and fences, tried to build in the space between the villages on the other side and those on this one? And if they had, what had happened? Had the Great Meadow swallowed them, made them never-there?

He looked forward, seeing that he'd come to a valley's pouting lip. The road curved gently downward. Here and there along its visible length he saw more signs and tributary roads that must lead to more settlements. When Edward had left Mead (when he'd been *forced* from it, he mentally amended), humans had been scattered savages. They'd had that one settlement — the Realm — and the rest lived in small shelters and caves, using magic rocks to make fire. Now they were everywhere. The road signs, as he began walking the valley, pointed in every direction, to everything. Small human houses dotted the landscape, isolated but plentiful. And always forward, the small wooden signs pointed the way to The Realm. Capital T, capital R. How much had changed? And how long had he been gone?

The unicorn was tireless, eager to reach The Realm and see if it was the same as before. If it was, Edward could find the haven. And if he could find the haven, he could reach Mead. The world may have changed, but it was still the world, and mountains took unicorn lifetimes to rise and fall. He

would still be able to find the line of hills he'd last traversed when the world had felt young, and his grappies had been alive. He would find the river, the valley, and the meadow where he'd last tried to fly. Edward thought of his wings and again decided to keep them at his sides. He would never pass for a horse, but it felt safer to be a small target, just in case.

Night fell, and still Edward kept walking. The world was quiet under the stars, as it should be, and Edward found himself remembering the cat in the other world. He remembered the Dark Forest — which, ironically, hadn't been as dark as the night around him was now, with its candlelit windows and its fireflies. He remembered the Sandman and the piper. He found himself feeling unreality suffuse him, suddenly unsure if any of his travels had actually happened. Had he really crossed worlds? Had he really met all those beings, all those creatures? Had a strange cat really flitted from branch to branch in front of him, trying to convince him that he might not be as real as he thought he was?

Now that he was nearing home (and in the dark, with the human settlements and roads obscured, it even *felt* like home, with familiar stars overhead), his adventure felt like a story Grappy might tell in front of the fire, over a steaming mug of marshmallow chocolate. The entire journey felt like something from a tale — which, Edward thought as he remembered the words of the Sandman, might be exactly the point.

Morning dawned, and the short grass became tipped with dew. Edward felt his newly adult ankles brushed with moisture. He'd come far in the night and could finally see a settlement on the horizon. This one was different from the others; it was huge and gray, alive with activity even in the dawn hours, visible from afar. Edward could see a wall around the buildings, and the buildings themselves appeared to be made of stone. Looking at the wall, Edward felt a chill. If he was looking at The Realm, this wasn't the same Realm he'd known. When Edward had looked at the human city from Adam and Eve's haven, it had looked like a collection of ramshackle huts. What he saw now looked like a fortress, with tall borders made of hewn stone.

He remembered Grappy's trepidation about the wall — his feeling that it was symbolic, the humans keeping themselves separate just as they kept magic separate: light from dark, dark from light, just like the peach tree in early Mead. And if the wall had been worth fearing all those (apparent) years ago, then given its size now, Edward should be terrified. Before, the

humans had used pickets to make their wall. Now they had fortified stone with parapets, and Edward could see where men on guard might stroll around the wall's top.

The city wasn't truly closed off, though; the wall included an enormous set of wooden gates that, as Edward neared, he could see were standing wide open. Humans were moving in and out, casually, on wheeled carts or on foot. And, Edward saw, on horses.

That made his lip curl. *Horses.*

Edward remembered what Grappy had said about horses, and about his theory that Providence had created horses in unicorn form as a way of mocking them. Only Grappy didn't see it as mockery, per se — more like a good-natured joke. Edward understood the concept but didn't have much experience with it. Even his appies had mocked him. It was how unicorns were. If Providence was trying to nudge unicorns with the existence of dumb beings that looked exactly like them, Edward was ill-equipped to understand it. So he let it go.

The city was enormous. It wasn't just a castle, though it contained one. It wasn't just a collection of homes, though it appeared to have those as well. It was more than a city, and Edward found himself wondering at what Saul the piper had said. There had apparently been unicorn incursions — incursions that somehow hadn't destroyed the city. It raised a host of questions. Because if those *incursions* couldn't really have been invasions (the city was still standing), then what *had* they been? Why had the unicorns intervened at all? In his day (not long ago by Edward's timeline but apparently a long time by everyone else's), unicorns had avoided humans. The two groups had stared at one another across long distances, wary. Only Adam and a few crazy others had been heretic enough to desire entry into the human settlements. What had changed that? What had the humans done to warrant unicorn attention? Was it malicious? Dangerous? Edward had no way to know. And similarly, the unicorn couldn't know if his presence would be alarming, if city dwellers would try to attack or drive him away.

The thought was too late, and apparently groundless. People came and went, glancing at Edward in ways that weren't unfriendly. He looked inside the open gate, wondering if he could — or should — enter the city. The enormous stone walls surrounded a whole system of buildings. Near the front gates were wide, dusty streets lined with small stalls backed by people

selling produce, items crafted from alloy, tools, and other items they'd grown or created. Edward could see a shop that repaired wagon wheels and another that crafted horse shoes. That made Edward double-take. *Shoes for horses?* It made no sense. He saw a cobbler of human shoes, and a maker of clothes. There seemed to be homes scattered throughout, and in the very center was a huge castle made from the same gray stone as the wall. The castle was the city's crowning jewel, topped with towers and parapets, studded with small windows that looked into what seemed from the ground to be bleak darkness.

As he approached, Edward saw a human boy of mayhap twelve years old sitting on a row of rocks lining the road. The boy wasn't like the others: going about their business, moving in and out, and bustling with purpose — *grim* purpose, Edward realized now that he had the boy for contrast. The boy seemed to have no purpose. He was simply sitting, one foot on the rock, knee against his narrow chest, his other foot dangling and kicking at the dirt. The boy's gaze was down, his leather shoe brushing soil. He had a mop of dirty blond hair, and as he watched his swinging foot, the mop obscured his face.

Edward approached the boy.

He didn't like humans and didn't particularly want to become involved with any of them, but something within his new adult body had brought him to the city gates. He hadn't even done it intentionally. Here he was, on the city's doorstep, and he'd already decided this wasn't the same place the Realm had been years before. Mayhap it had been destroyed during Mead's flood, or mayhap it had moved. A flood would destroy this city as well (and the idiots had put it in a *valley*, Edward thought with scorn), but very little else could. They'd made it sturdy, built to last. But regardless of why or how or when they'd made this new Realm, it wasn't where it was before. The hills were different, like the valleys and rivers, as much as he could see them. Edward didn't know where the haven had been relative to this place, or where Mead was, but at least he was finally in the right world. Finding home, if it still existed, simply meant putting one hoof in front of the other until he was there.

Still, his hooves had brought him here — not past the city, but directly to it. There was something about this Realm that mattered. He thought yet again of Adam, about how he'd wanted to open ties with the humans, and had, Edward remembered, implored his grandson to do the same. At the

time, the idea had seemed repugnant. But so much had changed. Worlds had been crossed; empires had risen. Something had leaked, and the humans were, Edward could feel, still using the magic they didn't understand.

The Realm wasn't just a stop for Edward. The Realm mattered.

And so, apparently, did the boy with lightness radiating from his soul, bright enough for Edward to feel in his bones.

"Boy," said Edward.

The boy looked up, met Edward's big, blue eyes, then looked down again. In that small glance, Edward saw that the boy's eyes were as blue as his own.

"I'm talking to you."

"I know," said the boy.

He didn't say anything else, and for a moment Edward didn't know how to continue. His part of the exchange could've been read from a master unicorn script. It was the way all adult unicorns spoke, and Edward had adapted automatically, drawing from memory. Edward was the inquirer. The boy was the subject. When a unicorn adult approached a lesser (that *lesser* had been Edward many times), what followed was more like an interrogation than a discussion, and the subject of that interrogation was supposed to have the good sense to act appropriately humbled. But the boy had taken Edward at face value, believing that the unicorn's statement about talking to him was simply Edward stating the obvious.

Edward considered telling the boy to show some respect but realized that was ego talking. The boy wasn't disrespecting him; he had seen it in his brief blue-eyed glance. Edward wondered again why he was at the city, why he was talking to the boy, and what he hoped would happen next.

"What's your name?" Edward asked.

Again looking down, still brushing the dirt with the tip of his toe, he said, "David."

"I'm Edward."

The boy looked up again. Something passed between them as their eyes met. Edward realized that David didn't seem remotely surprised that a unicorn was speaking to him. Realm citizens had either experienced some non-acrimonious dealings with unicorns, or David was simply very accepting. Regardless, Edward continued to feel that strange compulsion in his chest — a force drawing him to this boy. Why was that? He'd never felt anything quite like it, even with other unicorns. Edward hadn't been old

enough to find a mate when last he'd seen his own kind, but this didn't seem like the compulsion others called love. It was more like intuition. It felt like a thread stretched between them, as if something in David was reaching out to something in Edward, and the unicorn was reaching the rest of the way to grasp it.

"Hi, Edward."

"Do you live here?"

David looked toward the open gate with a longing glance. His look suggested that the gate was closed, chained, boarded, and barricaded.

"I used to."

"But you don't now?"

"No." He looked up. "You see, sir, I lived near the castle."

Edward felt disarmed. He'd never been called "sir" and didn't know the word, but its meaning was clear from context. It was a noble thing, a gesture of the boy's respect. Edward suddenly felt ashamed for doubting the boy earlier then wondered at his own sense of shame.

"Why does it matter that you lived near the castle?"

"Because of Goliath, sir."

"Goliath?"

"The tyrant king." David looked up at him as if realizing for the first time that Edward was a unicorn. His head cocked sideways, and his shaggy blond hair spilled across his brow. "You don't know about Goliath?"

Edward shook his big white head then looked at the people coming and going. It didn't seem like a city under a tyrant's siege.

"Don't let them fool you," said David, following Edward's gaze as if reading his mind. "The people of the outer rings are merchants, and they must trade so The Realm can grow."

Edward sighed. He didn't want to ask a human boy for a lesson but would apparently have to. His only other option was to keep his unflappable unicorn pride and spend hours trying to mine a story the hard way.

"I'm not from around here," said Edward, realizing it was a half truth. "Tell me about the city."

The boy shifted on the rock, dropping his second foot to the dirt. He looked up at Edward and smiled. The unicorn couldn't help but admire his bearing. He was obviously upset, apparently displaced from his home. And yet here he was smiling as he readied his tale.

“All right,” said David. “The Realm is arranged in rings, with the castle at its center. Around it, there’s a circle of small farms. That’s where I used to live. The farms grew food for themselves and to sell throughout The Realm, because the next ring out grows nothing. They are the smiths and tailors, makers of carts and tools. The traders, who make nothing but sell everything for the others, are on the outside.”

“Okay,” said Edward.

“The king and queen lived in the castle. Their job was to care for the kingdom. They settled disputes and saw that holes were repaired in interior roads. They were like the keepers. We all gave a small percentage of what we had because they were the king and queen and watched out for us. They raised the army that would protect the city if it was attacked again.”

Edward wanted to ask about the word “again,” but something else seemed more important.

“Their job *was* to take care of the kingdom?”

“Yes, sir,” said David. “A few years ago, when I was nine, a tribe of barbarians came to the city. Our army almost drove them off, but all we had were spears and rocks and one canon, and the wall wasn’t complete. The army was led by Goliath. He is a giant. Our men and women couldn’t hurt him because he is strong and wears heavy armor. He killed the king and queen then took over the castle, which he made our people change so he could fit inside and live in its walls. He killed many of the workers because they were too slow, or failed to remove an arch that Goliath bumped his head into. Once the giant was settled, he declared himself king. He dismissed his army, and they filtered into the farms and became overseers. Instead of accepting some of what we had, Goliath wanted it all. He wanted to sell it — to make *himself* prosper rather than The Realm. He took from the others, too — smiths, tailors, and makers of objects. But he took most from the farms, and let many farmers starve. We tried to push back, to tell Goliath that if we couldn’t live, we couldn’t make him food. But he found something. A kind of magic. After that, he was able to make plows plow themselves, and crops grow large without tending. He said he didn’t need us anymore then threw us out of the city. The makers of things fear they are next, if Goliath finds a way to smith copper and iron with magic. For now, they are safe. The sellers in the outer ring are safest because their services are still required, seeing as magic cannot sell goods for gold and silver.”

David looked at the gates and sighed. “So this is who we are. What the great Realm has become. You haven’t seen it before now? Well, look upon it, sir. It’s a rich city because it has a rich king, and the rest go on happily because they know nothing else. But us? My family? The workers who used to make The Realm run? We are no longer required.”

Edward looked into the city’s teeming marketplace, now seeing it for what it was: desperate animals fighting for scraps. His opinion of humanity wasn’t rising. His opinion of the boy David, on the other hand, remained intact. The unicorn felt conflicted. Was this a city worth pitying? Or a city in need of destroying?

“Where do you live now?”

“We found a new farm outside the walls. Farming is all we know, sir, and we need food to live. We couldn’t afford land, so we’ve reached an agreement.”

“An agreement with who?”

David gave a small, bitter laugh. “With King Goliath, sir. He’s claimed all of this land. He has his magic at use in the city and doesn’t need us, but why waste wealth outside the walls? So we give him most of what we have, and are left with barely enough to survive.”

Edward looked at the castle again, now feeling something he’d never felt. It was indignation — a deep anger that grew from a sense of unfairness. He knew it by description because to be indignant, you had to be proud enough to believe you deserved better, and he’d always been small and beaten. But now he was big, and strong. Now he was magic. He’d found something that was unfair, and that made him angry for a reason he couldn’t explain.

“David,” Edward said, feeling that strange connection between himself and the boy.

David looked up.

“Would you like to get your home back?”

David didn’t ask *how*. Drawing from some internal strength, he simply believed. The boy nodded.

“Good,” Edward said, “because I would like to help you.”



CHAPTER 23

YOUNG DAVID

Edward *did* want to help David, though the unicorn wouldn't have been able to explain why. The idea, even as they began working together, made him equally proud and repulsed. David was noble and worthy, with a spark inside him that Edward rarely saw, even in unicorns. But he was human. The unicorn found himself remembering everything that he himself had told Grappy in the haven, when Grappy was arguing that unicorns should work with humans: They were vulgar, greedy, out-of-control beings who knew how to use and consume, but not how to create or give back. Humans didn't achieve equilibrium with their world; they sucked up resources and scoured land clean so they could lay buildings atop it and call it their own. Humans collected animals and kept them fenced, claiming other lives for their own use as if they had every right in the world. And humans, Edward remembered with a start, rode horses.

But the truth said that David was different. Yar, he was soft and fleshy and mortal, but Edward's new magic could sense something below that soft, fleshy exterior, and it was good — almost *unicorn* good, though tainted by a human's peculiar brew of light and dark magic. He found that he could almost close his eyes and think of the boy as someone like himself — as if they were but two voices speaking in nothingness, like Adam and Eve floating in the beginning void, turning end for end.

David lit with a child's excitement when Edward began working with him, teaching him the skills he'd need to fell the behemoth occupying The Realm. It was as if he forgot what was at stake and considered only adventure's thrill, making Edward think of the excitement he and Cerberus shared when playing battle back in Mead, each secretly pretending the other were dark armies of trolls and ghryst. But it wasn't play, and the stakes were monumental: David's home, the balance within the human city, and David's very life.

That last hit Edward late; he himself was almost immortal, and had only spent significant time with other immortals. Only after their training was underway did it dawn on the unicorn that David could die. Edward felt guilty — guilty for raising the kid's hopes, for putting him in peril, and for committing him to fight because David wouldn't back down for anything.

Edward tried to think of the things he'd learned, both from Grappy and from his journey through the various worlds. There was the Wellspring to think about. And there were the curious things said by both the Sandman and the cat, about everyone having a story. Was this not another story? And might the Sandman find it worthy of recording in the other worlds — if that was how it worked?

Ultimately, Edward didn't know, and really it didn't matter. Unicorns seldom had to consider right and wrong; everything they did, in the end, was more or less right. There were shades of right, but never true wrong. Unicorn elders were strangely accepting, tending to believe that what would be would be, that even the most insidious wrong was right in the end. Edward knew that Grappy believed that.

But the more he learned about Goliath, the more Edward saw evidence that there was such a thing as true right and wrong. Goliath was wrong. If Edward thought the humans consumed, Goliath made them look generous. If Edward thought that humans were cruel, Goliath made them look like pixies. And if Edward thought that humans were selfish? Well, Goliath was selfishness personified.

Edward had laid eyes on the giant after taking excursions into the city to map the ground. Everything inside him rebelled at what he saw and felt. Goliath's internal ugliness had boiled to his surface, twisting his features and wrinkling his skin into repulsive pits and valleys. His face was studded with black warts, with a waddle of skin under his chin that quaked when he stomped through the city, smashing without heed. The giant seemed to be simple: He thought of something he wanted to do then did it. Sometimes he wanted to step on a vendor's cart and destroy it, so he did. Sometimes he wanted food, so he reached into public stores and took it. Edward asked around; he heard tales of the giant taking farm animals, mercantile supplies, carts, children from families to work in his castle as slaves. He was enormous and strong — easily as tall as four or five Edwards stood on end. The unicorn heard a story that once, the giant had ripped a peasant family's house from its foundation because he wanted his castle to have another outbuilding. At first, Edward thought it was just a legend, but then he approached the castle and saw the building snugged tight against the castle wall, its foundation ragged where it had been ripped from the ground.

They trained. The boy asked constant questions that Edward forced himself to answer even though he often found them annoying.

“Edward,” said David. “Can you help me?”

The unicorn was standing in a field outside the city walls, watching from a distance as the boy took aim at a stone with a slingshot. They’d trained David’s muscles with sticks, staffs, and thrown rocks, but the boy was best with a slingshot. As more and more time passed, Edward began to feel an ever-growing futility and wondered if he’d made a mistake. The idea that David (a boy) could defeat Goliath (a giant) with only a slingshot was absurd.

“I am helping you,” Edward said. “Aim better.”

David looked over, a rock stretched tight in his slingshot’s pouch. He made a sarcastic face then let the rock fly. His target was near, but the boy missed high and to the right anyway.

“Let me help again,” said Edward. He shifted his weight as if preparing to make a sagely point. “When you fire the slingshot, actually hit your target.”

Instead of picking up a new rock to use as ammunition, David tucked the slingshot into the back of his pants, fork and sling hanging low. He walked to the unicorn.

“No,” said David, looking up at Edward with his deep blue eyes. The eyes seemed older than the rest of him. David was indeed twelve, but his eyes were timeless, as if they looked back to the Wellspring. “I meant to *help me*. To fight with me.”

Edward shook his head. “A unicorn won’t get involved in human affairs.”

“But you already have. You’re helping me in this way. You told me I could fight. You made me a better slingshot. Besides, your kind have been involved plenty. My grammy told me about the unicorn incursions.”

“I know nothing of those.”

“There have been several. That’s how our stories go, anyway. So you see, you’ve already interfered. Usually on the other side, which is why some of the oldest people look at you like they do. They don’t trust you. Most humans think unicorns are disinterested in us at best, and a threat at worst. We want to believe in you, but it’s hard. We know you are white magic, and know what white magic can do. All but the worst people understand that even when you’ve fought us, it’s been for the greater good. But still, your kind are, in our tales, the army that keeps coming to take

away what we have. What we've earned. What we have claimed for ourselves. Help me now, and everyone will love you. You'll be our savior."

"But then I'd be your savior," said Edward. "They'd want me to stay, and call on me the next time you face a tyrant."

"So?" said David. "Stay. Be my friend. We'll rid The Realm of Goliath. We'll find a new king and queen. My family will reclaim our house, and you can take one beside it. It will even be available. Goliath killed our neighbors before he sent us all away."

Edward shook his head. "I don't want to live in a human place."

"Then help us this once. Help us with Goliath, then go on your way."

Edward could tell that the boy hurt when he said it. He wanted the unicorn to stay — and what astonished Edward was that although he had no interest in living inside the walls of The Realm, he wanted to stay, too.

He sighed then told the boy to sit. David did, perching on the large rock he'd been shooting at moments before. The rock was seated atop a low rock wall, and wobbled as David sat. Edward resisted an urge to direct him toward a different seat lest he fall and hurt himself, but then realized what they'd been doing out here — preparing for a young boy to face a giant, apparently armed only with a slingshot. He let it go.

"David," he said, "I have a riddle. What is the purpose of life?"

The boy shook his head.

"I'm glad you don't know. Because I don't either."

David stared for a long moment then said, "That's a terrible riddle."

"Yar. But it's a riddle true, so far as a riddle can be. It's not just humans who wonder why they are here. We wonder too, and we were here first. My grappy and grammy, when I was a colt ... " Edward paused, suddenly realizing that he had no idea how long ago that had been, or how old he was now. "When I was a colt, they told me their story about the beginning. When it was only unicorns in the world — and I do mean *only*." He told David the short version of Adam and Eve's story about rotating end for end in the void, still not knowing if Grappy had been pulling his leg. The boy giggled.

"When they were the only creatures, there was no conflict. There were grasses and plains and clouds and rivers, and soon after there were other magical creatures like elves and fairies. Everything got along. Nothing killed or ate anything else; the unicorns didn't even crop the grass. But nothing moved. Do you know what was missing?"

David cocked his head.

“Conflict. The world needed it. I’ll tell you the whole story someday, if you care to hear. For now, I’ll say that only with two sides did the machine grind forward. Then, life really began.”

“You’re saying the purpose of life is conflict?”

Edward shook his head. “I’m saying that there must be two sides. I’m also saying that nobody, even the earliest unicorns, knows why. I’m not sure what happened to Grammy and Grappy, but they believed their passing would return them to the source of everything, which they called the Wellspring. They would become part of it again, and it would be like they were never here. So here’s another riddle: If that’s true — if everything, including the wisest old unicorns, must return to their source and stop being what they were in life — why *were* they here?”

David, sitting atop the stone, shook his head. He said, “I don’t think you know what a riddle is.”

“I’m saying that in the end, all we have are our guesses. But as far as anyone can suppose, the only thing you leave behind once you return to the Wellspring are the changes you’ve made. It’s all you have. You change the world by being here, and for some reason, this world outside the Wellspring seems to matter. But if the Wellspring is the center and what happens here is play — destined to end and return to the center — the change that matters is the one you make to the magic inside you.”

“I don’t understand.”

Edward snorted. David said that a lot, and the unicorn hated it. Edward liked to proselytize when it was his idea but didn’t like to explain things, which was what the same activity became once the human failed to grasp what he was saying. One inevitably led to another because humans were dense, but it was irritating to explain something clearly and not be understood. No matter where Edward went after leaving The Realm, he’d find a life without dense people. If he had to spend his life explaining the world to a stupid companion, the unicorn would suffer insanity.

“Let’s just say that if *I* defeat your giant, it does nothing to make *you* better.”

“I don’t want to be better,” said David. “I just want my home back.”

“But getting better — *good enough to defeat a giant* better — will earn your home ... and assure that it never gets taken from you again. It will make you the protector you want me to be. It’s the only way to push things

forward. Right now, I have power. You have potential. If you develop it and gain your own power, the world has become more, and you are doing your duty to the Wellspring.”

It looked like David was understanding. He nodded then said, “You’re a jerk.”

It was true. But jerk or not, Edward wouldn’t help. Everything he’d told David was true, but there was more that he didn’t want to try and explain because the boy would never understand. Right now, Edward felt as if he were doing his duty to the Wellspring too. He hadn’t told the boy about the spark he saw within him. He hadn’t mentioned the deep connection he seemed to feel. Edward had walked the city, had mingled with those coming and going from its gates. He’d used his new magic to poke at any human he could find. None sparked like David. This one small boy had nobility, and it was a seed that, properly developed, could save the city.

Edward sensed a duty to the boy, a duty to this axial world, and somehow even a duty to Grappy all at once. He remembered what Adam had said about shepherding the humans — of working to help them wield the dangerous tools that Providence had given them. This was somehow a chance to do that. Edward could guide David and help the boy meet his ability. But he could not do anything for him. Conflict sharpened the blade and made progress grind forward. The boy had nobility and light. The giant had cruelty and darkness. The world had to see that the small could still triumph over the mighty — and conversely, that the small required the mighty’s honing edge in order to become what it needed to become.

And so they trained. Edward used his magic to help David aim his slingshot but never to guide the stones. He found that he could project small red dots on the targets, which made aiming easier. He gave David exercises to do — holding stones and logs in front of and beside him at the ends of extended arms to strengthen his shoulders. He had the boy pinch hard lumps of clay between his fingers to improve his grip and stability. He had David lie on the ground and use his arms to press his body up repeatedly. He had him lie on his back, anchor his feet, bend his legs, then curl up to solidify his middle. He told the boy to grab a tree branch and hang until his grip nearly surrendered, then told him to pull himself up until his chin was above the branch. David hated all of it. He complained. He cried. He threatened to walk away, and sometimes did. But the boy always returned, once rested with his anger purged. David had a temper, but he also had a

sensibility far beyond his years. He began to understand, though that comprehension didn't kill his complaints.

Weeks passed. Time didn't matter because David had little else to do. His family had to give half of their crops to Goliath no matter how much they grew, so they only kept a small garden to feed themselves. David had parents and siblings, and all seemed to see what was coming. They absorbed the farm's extra work. David's mother fretted and cried, thinking of what was to come. But then she too — possessed of the same odd sensibility as her son — came back around and allowed it to happen.

A month.

Two months.

David's aim with the slingshot improved. Edward began providing the boy with moving targets, painting red dots on walls as they circulated like fireflies. Because the dots were magic, he could feel when David struck them — and that was good because there would have been no way to tell otherwise. The dots moved too fast, and Edward had begun to give him several, one only slightly redder than the red-orange dots he was to avoid at all costs. David's eyes learned to pick the correct target from the decoys, to follow it, and anticipate its movements. His shoulders grew strong enough to stretch the slingshot farther, and the increased tension gave his ammunition greater speed, allowing him to strike dots before they darted too far away. He broke his first slingshot one day while drawing back, and Edward fashioned him a stronger one. Then he broke that one, and the slingshot that followed it.

Three months.

Four.

David turned thirteen. His small muscles, especially at the back of his pull arm and the front of his aiming arm, became larger. His eyes found new focus. Edward threw pebbles across great distances. David kept his slingshot at his belt, then drew, loaded, and fired twice before the pebbles struck ground.

Edward fashioned new ammunition for David out of alloys from the ground, creating very hard, smooth, heavy little balls. David's accuracy improved. When he struck the pebbles thrown by Edward's magic, he cracked them in half or blew them to dust.

Edward fashioned armor. He taught the boy to dodge, roll, dive, and duck. He taught him how to find and use obstacles for cover. He taught

David how to be light of foot, bending his legs and ankles on every step so he hit the ground with whispers. The armor, made of a lighter material than the new slingshot ammunition, rattled and slowed him, so David removed it. Edward told him to put it back on, arguing that he'd need the armor to protect himself. But David refused, insisting that his speed and stealth were a better defense than plating. Edward didn't argue. He met the boy's blue eyes. He saw in their new sharpness that David wouldn't be swayed, and that he was right.

Edward threw objects at David, and the boy learned to dodge. He fired rocks at the child, who anticipated Edward's aim and countered. Edward challenged David to hit him, to see if the boy could catch a unicorn. David didn't hesitate, knowing that Edward could heal. And because a good cold-hearted killer doesn't hesitate to take any given opportunity, David had snatched the slingshot from his side pouch and fired two alloy balls into Edward's side before the unicorn could think to raise a shield.

Edward's magic squeezed the shells into the dirt with less malice than the unicorn imagined he should have for someone who had wounded him. David smiled, slipping the slingshot back into the strappy pouch at his side, with no indication that, were Edward a horse, he might be dead, and that David himself would have been responsible.

"Now," said Edward, "you are ready."



CHAPTER 24

DAVID AND GOLIATH

Everyone had heard.

That wasn't supposed to happen. David was small, and Goliath was huge. David wore only clothing, and Goliath wore giant-forged armor. David was young. Goliath was in his prime, strong and fast and battle tested. David was kindhearted and fair. Goliath was cruel and dishonest. David had been raised to ask for permission; Goliath was used to crushing others and taking all that he wanted. Goliath needed not a single advantage, yet foreknowledge that David was coming to challenge him was definitely one.

Edward's idea — and David had instantly agreed — was to sneak up on Goliath when he was napping in the sun on the castle grounds and slit his throat with a sword. It had been tried before, but Goliath had guards and so it had never worked. David was quieter and faster than his predecessors and could take the guards out with stealth. But when David entered the city, the entire citizenry lined up to watch him, filling the main street leading toward the castle, eyeing the child. Edward followed at a distance. The crowd asked a thousand nonverbal questions, eyes asking the unicorn if he was part of the fight. Their looks asked the unicorn if, after the battle, he and his kind would take over The Realm. Their looks asked if David could do what he was setting out to do, and asked if they should dare to hope.

Goliath had bested The Realm's finest. Of course the boy wouldn't win, and of course Goliath was too cruel to let him live. The Realm citizens looked reserved and sad as if watching a procession headed for the gallows. But even among the grim hordes, Edward noticed a few hopeful faces from people who were dressed like David and slightly dirty. Edward realized they were the displaced farmers who had once worked the land around the castle before the giant had ejected them. They weren't supposed to be in the city — like David wasn't supposed to be in the city — but they hadn't been able to resist, eager to watch and hope that the giant might find some small measure of pain.

The farmers looked at Edward, sure that the unicorn they'd heard was training young David would come to the boy's rescue. But of course he

could not. This was David's fight. A human fight. He *couldn't* intervene. He wouldn't intervene. Anything different was spit in the eye of Providence.

They reached the end of the three-person-deep gauntlet of citizens and found Goliath in all his misshapen and monstrous glory at the castle dooryard, standing in full armor as always, a set of massive hands in fists on his hips, his face ugly and pocked. The giant's teeth were too large inside his mouth and made his lips bulge like an ape's. When he opened his mouth, Edward saw that the giant only had four or five teeth, and all were in his gums wrong, jutting roughly at odd angles, sideways, canted over empty spaces like tipped tombstones. He bellowed as they approached, and Edward could smell the giant's sour, decayed breath as if he'd been eating flesh or was rotting from inside. Edward hung back, pushing his way into the crowd to the astonishment of the shoved-aside humans. David walked on as if he were taller than he actually was.

The giant made two big steps, seemingly just so he could make the ground shake with his footfalls. He was the opposite of David — heavy where the boy was light, obvious and stark where the boy had learned to be a shadow. But it was high noon, and the actual shadows were short, and as the enormous man and the small boy faced each other, centered in a ring of many citizens, there was nowhere to run or hide. Stealth wouldn't help. Goliath was staring him down in front of the closed castle door.

"Go home, boy," Goliath boomed. His voice was loud and deep but somehow strangely proper, as if he'd come from a land of manners but was warped along the way.

David stood his ground and shook his head. "I have come to fight you."

Edward had seen humans put their faces in their hands. He suddenly wished he could do the same. This was a terrible idea. Looking at it, the absurdity was obvious. David didn't have the element of surprise, or magic. He didn't even have armor. His only weapon was a slingshot. And he was good with the slingshot, yar — but the giant wore armor. He was so big and tall that even David was still far even when close to the giant. The boy had fired at targets from every distance, but there was something Edward had forgotten: Even if he struck the target every time, what difference would it really make against one such as Goliath? He hadn't even considered the giant's imperviousness. Edward had never fought one, but giants were

semi-magical. Was it possible they'd be able to regenerate? That they could summon shields? Or cast spells?

It would have been a perfect time for Goliath to laugh, mocking David. But he didn't. Instead, the giant unfurled a massive fist from his hip. Goliath's expression was miles from pity, but still it seemed that he wanted to offer the idiot child a chance to save himself. He shoed at David like a fly, his gargantuan hand flapping like a windmill's blade.

"Go home, I said."

David let his left hand hover above his slingshot. The pouch at his side wasn't much more than a short, wide tube of leather. David stored the slingshot in it almost upside down, the handle pointing up and to his rear for easy access. He had a second reservoir of alloy balls near his right hand. Edward knew David's adopted stance, with both hands above their cargo, was so he could fire in barely any time at all. But again, what damage could the boy do? He'd need a canon to do anything. Mayhap Goliath had the right idea. Now, David could walk out and live. If he fought, even his family would suffer. The only thing worse than living under a tyrant was living under a tyrant who had a reason to personally despise you.

David's voice was too steady, too brave. He was being foolhardy. "Make me," he said.

Goliath knelt. Even kneeling, he towered above David. His big right hand was on his knee. With a surprisingly quick motion, he swatted David in the chest and sent the boy flying backward. He struck a cart wheel and sent it to splinters. The cart's produce fell to the street. The crowd gasped. Then, tentatively, a few looked at one another then at Goliath, nervously clapping.

David stood and again came forward. Bits of lettuce had peppered his shirt, but still he stood as he had, in front of Goliath's giant paw on his massive knee, hands hovering above his slingshot and ammunition.

"This is your last chance."

Edward automatically looked at Goliath, but it wasn't the giant who'd spoken. That absurd sentence was said by David, whose face was set, with piercing eyes trained on his foe.

The giant reached out again, but this time David was ready. He darted to the side, toward the swipe, and easily stayed outside his hand's arc. Goliath, seemingly annoyed, extended his arm and tried again, this time reaching. But David, who wasn't above shameless evasion, disappeared

between the crowds' legs. Goliath stood and looked at where he'd gone, already coming forward. The crowd parted in terror. There was nothing behind them except for another cart, this one filled with fruit.

Edward looked to one side of the parted crowd then the other. He hadn't seen David move, and didn't see David now. Still, he had to be in one of the groups. He looked at the people, but none were looking down as if there was a boy at their feet. They were all staring at Goliath, their hands halfway up in subconscious surrender.

Goliath had figured it out, so he pushed the people to the ground as carelessly as if searching for insects in grass. The people spilled to the dirt — first one side then the other — and Goliath began to rummage through the fallen townspeople like pebbles, pushing them across the dirt with his huge fingers. He reached out and smashed the fruit cart, flinging pulp across the open space.

Before he could look further, something leaped onto his back, then sprang upward, climbing the joints in his armor like stairs. David had circled around, moving through the crowd without, apparently, alerting any of its residents. Goliath spun, now finally taking the encounter serious enough to grow angry. He swatted at his back, making sounds with his giant hands like the clanging of great bells. David kept ahead of him, skittering across his armor plates like a monkey. Goliath continued to swat, now dancing in the open space like a man on fire. David evaded him for a while, but there was only so far he could go. The boy didn't carry a knife and needed two hands for his slingshot. He stopped when he was beside the giant's ears and steadied himself on a ridge near Goliath's neck plate. The giant felt him there and twitched like a horse dislodging a fly, and David, with no handholds, found himself falling. Goliath tried to punch him from the air, but gravity was faster. David struck the ground then tucked and rolled to turn his downward thrust into forward momentum.

He rolled under the giant's feet, away from and inside the arc of his swinging fist. Goliath pivoted, trying to crush him, but Goliath had underestimated David's courage. He didn't retreat; he engaged without pause, jumping up to grab at the giant's undercarriage. He again began climbing, shoving his hands into the armor's joints as if searching for weakness.

Watching, Edward couldn't help but think that even if David died, he'd won. Goliath had been the feared ruler of this place for years. His power

came from terror. David had no fear, and Goliath was showing himself to have plenty — or at least, showing himself to have cowardice. He was fighting a small human boy, and he'd worn his best armor. It was a frail move with no dignity. No matter how the fight ended, Realm citizens would see Goliath for what he was. And, Edward thought, they would never let him rule again.

Except that the people of The Realm weren't cheering. Their eyes were wide and terrified. David was staying ahead of their big, strong ruler, naked of armor and unafraid. Yet the humans saw nothing of it. They looked ready to kneel, ready to run or worship when the giant's fury turned on them.

As Goliath spun, trying anew to dislodge David, he proved himself even more cowardly. He couldn't shake off the boy; David's fingers and arms had grown strong, and he could cling to the armor plates even as Goliath danced and crashed.

The giant slammed his big back into the castle wall, making it spit dust. David clambered away from the point of impact, easily rolling to the side as the walls shook. Goliath called for his guards to help, and immediately three stout things that weren't quite human ran from the crowd. All wore armor but not like Goliath's; it consisted of a front and a back plate to protect the heart, with straps on the side for mobility. David looked down and saw his chance. He needed two hands to fire his weapon and needed at least one hand to hang on. So he let go. The minute he left Goliath's shoulder, his hands drew his slingshot and an alloy ball. He fired then fired again. Two shots flew before he struck the ground and parried away. Both found their marks, piercing two of the guard things in the side. David's pull was practiced and his aim true. The guards fell as the projectiles found their hearts.

David scampered around the castle, knowing he was faster than Goliath. He made it halfway around then stopped short just before the castle obscured Edward's vision. He'd drawn again in a second. The crowd gasped. And when the remaining guard rounded the curved wall, it found itself staring at David's drawn shell. The slingshot twanged. The alloy ball met the guard between the eyes and felled him.

Goliath was a half second behind, tight on the guard's heels. David turned into the oncoming threat, knowing the giant wouldn't know he had stopped. Without hesitating, David leaped yet again as the giant's chest appeared before him. Goliath saw it in time and raised his hand, but David

wasn't going for his chest; he was aiming for the castle wall. He took two running steps up, holding his body erect, drew, and fired before leaping clear. But Goliath was too big, too insurmountable. The alloy ball struck him in the neck but was little more than a snipe to the giant.

He slapped at his neck where the ball had struck, somewhere between annoyed and furious. Goliath turned on David then came roaring down, slamming his giant hands into the dirt, cracking the ground under his blows. All around the crowd, people gasped, flinching back involuntarily as Goliath struck. The carts around the opening shook. But David was so little and Goliath was so large that the boy could duck between his legs, staying tight to his body so the giant couldn't keep up. He tried to reach, and David ran to his back, tying Goliath as he tried to reach down, hitting his limit when folded, chest meeting his knees.

Goliath's anger at David's attack turned to rage over his humiliation. Now the boy was playing with him, making him look stupid in front of The Realm. Someone laughed as the giant tangled and fell. Goliath roared and used his giant hand to rip a castle statue from its pedestal and fling it at the offender.

David was fast, but Goliath had more fury and strength. The boy's advantage began to wane. Just as Edward was mentally urging the boy to fall back, he did. Goliath charged. David ducked behind a barrel; Goliath shattered it and sent a torrent of brew into the dirt. The boy pivoted, using both hands to leap a vendor's cart. Before Goliath could smash it, David was on its far side, circling around to the back. He had wedged himself in a corner of the castle wall, and the giant had him cornered. Edward saw the death blow coming. Goliath's fists rose, each half the size of the unicorn's body.

David seemed to have been waiting for this exact second. As Goliath's fists rose, he roared back and exposed his throat. David drew his slingshot and an alloy ball in a single smooth, lightning-quick motion as he touched knee to dirt. Sighting up at the underside of the giant's chin, he drew the ball back and let it go. The entire maneuver took less than a second, and when Goliath's fists struck the ground, so did the rest of him. David had to flinch back, pressing his shoulders to the wall, barely avoiding the crash.

It was over, and the crowd found its voice.

The Realm was free.



CHAPTER 25

UNICORN SUPERIORITY

Edward, telling his long story on Clint's porch, paused. Clint waited for a long beat while he magicked a dish of apple brew from Clint's kitchen. After the unicorn drank and looked up, Clint felt comfortable to speak.

"I've heard that story," he said.

"Yar?" said Edward. His mouth almost wanted to twitch with a smile — strange for Edward. But the almost-smile had a look of knowing more than mirth, and already Clint felt his defenses starting to rise. He'd had enough of the unicorn feeling superior and making fun of him for his ignorance.

"That's right," said Clint. "Same with the flood and the man with the boat. Same with some of the others, from when I was young in yonder city. But where I know them as entertainment, you tell them like they're history."

"It's a fine line, gunslinger."

"Really." He stood then looked Edward in the eye. This was the apocalypse. He'd seen many people die — many that he'd known and loved, in as much as the curdled heart of a widowed gunslinger *could* love. He'd ridden for miles and years with Edward, through agony and pain, and the unicorn still thought it was funny to mock him. He'd promised to speak true but was only spinning yarns.

"Yar, really," said Edward. A ghostly magic arm came from Edward's glowing horn, bent Clint in half, and planted him back on the deck, sitting against his will. "I am speaking true to you, gunslinger. The problem with you — the current problem with you, anyway — is that you have decided what is true ahead of time and will not listen to me. But what you must be too blind to see is that humans have always done that. It's the reason Adam was afraid of you and the reason we felt the need, over and over throughout your history, to step in and guide you. It was tempting to think of our role as being that of commanders, and that's how Cerberus saw it. He and many others wanted to *make* you do what we said was right, and even I, who was considered moderate, saw the point. You were impetuous then, and you remain impetuous now. Humans led the worlds to the Grand Cataclysm, and humans led the worlds to the shattering you see before you. It has always been because you assumed you were correct and acted around that

assumption. Sit and listen, because now that I'm telling this story, you will dagged well hear it."

"Unicorn superiority," Clint growled. "You're always right, aren't you? You think we're stubborn? Look in a mirror. Mayhap you should have eliminated us. It would have made things so much easier for you. Your way could have been undisputed. Just a world of unicorns, with no humans to threaten them."

"If only that had been a possibility," said Edward. "But no. Rest assured, in all versions of the story, you survived. And thrived." He grumbled then snorted. "You have always been the world's burden. The question was never one of you causing damage while pillaging lands. From the beginning, it was *how much* damage humans would cause. Ours was always a choice between bad and worse."

"Glad to know we're on the same page," said Clint, standing again.

Edward's left eye met both of Clint's for a tense moment, then the unicorn's demeanor softened. He seemed to remember that he was in the middle of his story, not its end, and that he needed an audience if he was to tell it. If Clint was reading Edward correctly — which, after all these years, he was pretty sure he was — then he was telling the truth about Clint needing to hear the story and its lessons before they marched forward to meet the waiting unknown.

"Still yourself, Clint," said Edward. "I chose you as my rider. You saw how I felt about David. There were others — plenty of others — who were as worthy. But your species has a history of untamed darkness, and that darkness is more often than not untamed because you are lazy, not through any overt intention. It makes you volatile. You must see that."

Clint saw Edward's peacemaking gesture then sat to answer. "Mayhap I see it, yar. But only if you see that your kind is arrogant."

Edward nodded surprisingly quickly. "Of course. Arrogant and blind. We have hidden behind masks of righteousness countless times. We are guilty of hoarding information and withholding secrets simply so that we alone possess them. The fact that the white unicorns among us have wings that we've kept hidden is just one more example."

Clint stared. Speechless. This was the first time that Edward had ever admitted to unicorn failings, and he'd done it so completely.

"Why *did* you hide your wings?" said Clint.

“First things first,” said Edward. “You said that you’d heard these stories before. And it’s true, you have. But you have assumed that humanity did first and told stories second. But that’s not necessarily the order.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes, the turkey comes first. Other times, the egg.”

Clint was starting to feel like punching Edward again. But he fought it, knowing Edward’s cryptic statement would be followed by the story’s conclusion. In the past, Edward was obtuse and unhelpful. Now he was still obtuse, but was at least following with a yarn worth hearing.

“All right,” said Clint. “Tell me the rest.”



CHAPTER 26

KING DAVID

Decades passed.

David urged The Realm's people to find themselves a new king and queen, but The Realm would hear none of it. David was just a boy, but he'd been the only one *able* to defeat the tyrant, or with enough courage to try. He had no choice but to take over.

Within days the people had moved him and his family into the castle almost as if by force. David protested, yet still people entered his old house then left carrying chairs, clothes, crates stacked with crops hastily pulled from their small personal garden. Pictures came off walls. Tools were transplanted into the castle's outbuildings. David tried to stay in the house with his father, but every day they didn't go was like being robbed. The only way to turn the robbery into a promotion was to follow their things.

It was too much work — and totally unnecessary in David's opinion — to reconvert the castle to use by normal-sized humans, so they left it how it was: too large, like an ill-fitting shoe. At first, the grand entrance, high-ceilinged rooms, and enormous fireplaces were intimidating, but David soon grew used to them. His family required no such adjustment. He had two sisters and a brother, plus his ammy and appy. They all loved the gigantic dining room table, plates the size of large serving platters, and delicate cups the size of their heads. They admired forged steins, big as their torsos, beds that the entire family could fit in, though they each had their own room because Goliath had converted every bed in the spirit of greed.

David found his place in time. Townspeople used to Goliath's tyranny asked him for his decree on laws. David told them to do whatever they wanted. They insisted, and David's father made the choices. As years grew long and David entered his teens, he finally began to accept his role, realizing that the people needed guidance and that the best he could do for them was to be as kind and benevolent a leader as he could be. He reestablished the old ways, with farmers working the land around the castle and paying a small due of their crops to the castle in exchange for leadership, with everyone farther out allowed to make their own trade.

Edward came and went. He went out on sojourn, searching for Mead, and found it in relatively short order. It was a day's walk. He'd been wrong about The Realm's location; it was, in fact, very near his grammies' haven's old location. But somehow the landmarks had shifted, and although he never got a firm explanation for why, Edward came to believe that it had happened in the fracturing of the worlds that started with the flood. This view was confirmed by the opinions (no one seemed to know for sure) of the other unicorns, still in Mead where Edward had left them all those years before.

Mead was still most of a day from the haven. But aside from the unbroken chain from Realm to haven to Mead, so much had changed around it. Edward's old pal, Cerberus, who was shocked and delighted to see Edward return, had explained why: Since the change — which the others called the Grand Cataclysm — magic's balance had shifted. Before, magic had been everywhere, but now it was concentrated mainly in what Cerberus called *veins*. The veins had always been magic's true source, but now it was mostly contained to the veins and the areas they touched. The early unicorns had known that, which was why they'd stayed in Mead. The humans settled where they'd found the most magical rocks, which happened to be on top of the same vein. Adam and Eve had known it, which was why they'd built their haven between the two.

Edward walked between The Realm and Mead often, and every time he made the journey, he passed the site of Grammy and Grappy's old place. The haven itself was gone, but Edward recognized its immediate surroundings, which had remained the same and intact as Mead and The Realm's positions. He could see rock outcroppings and, when he passed through, could stand where he'd known the shelter itself to have been, remembering how he'd sat with Adam and Eve, drinking marshmallow chocolate as Grappy spun one crazy yarn after another. He walked across to the spot where Adam's garden had been, remembering how Grappy had been spilling his magic into the ground on the day of the flood that killed them. Edward wondered, each time he crossed, if the old unicorns *had* actually been killed, or if they'd simply let go. Adam had been ready for the Wellspring, and so had Eve.

But they were gone; there was no question about that. Once Edward saw the haven's old location and finally found his bearings, realizing that the old landmarks were still in place as long as he stayed atop the magic

vein, the unicorn knew they were never coming back. He'd known it for a while. And now, right before he fell asleep, Edward felt the Wellspring's power. Somewhere between wakefulness and the surrender of sleep was an in-between place, and in that place he could sense Grappy's stories. He could sense Grammy's memories of Edward, and seeing them through his own eyes (or whatever passed for eyes as he fell asleep; he wasn't quite sure how that worked) was strange. But the other thing he felt, when he considered Grammy and Grappy and what might have become of them, was *peace*. They were where they wanted to be. They'd been ready to go because they'd been mere instances of a larger source of magic, and it would have been selfish to hold on.

Once Edward returned to Mead and found the other unicorns, he unleashed his torrent of questions: How long had he been gone? What had happened to the others while he'd been away? What had happened to the *world*? Only when they'd answered his questions did he venture versions of his own, and the versions he told were only halfway true.

He told Cerberus, Jack, Diane, and the others that he'd found himself in a different world, but he didn't explain the finest points of those worlds — in which Edward, himself, had begun to doubt his own existence. He sniffed around the edges of the other unicorns' knowledge and realized that they didn't seem to understand that their world was fundamentally different, that they were “in the center” as the cat had said.

As long as the others didn't ask for details, Edward felt he didn't want to volunteer more. It wasn't like they believed him anyway. Meeting those he'd met had been strange, and meeting the Sandman had been the strangest of all. But Edward didn't have to hide in subterfuge; the unicorns were arrogant, and more or less assumed that their world was more real and that they were central. Mead was where life had started, and where they were now. Hence, Mead mattered most.

Answers to Edward's own questions were unsatisfying. The Cataclysm, said Cerberus, seemed to have unseated the worlds into fractured bits, and then those pieces had shifted back and forth among one another like pieces of a puzzle floating on the surface of water. Edward's ammy and appy had searched for their colt for a long time after losing him in the storm then had eventually surrendered, sensing that he'd not returned to the Wellspring and hence was alive somewhere. They'd flown to a mountaintop and had spent many cycles of day and night waiting for the floodwater to recede. They

returned to Mead, found it cleared and filled with the scattered, exhausted others, and had begun to rebuild.

Soon after, the unicorns began to worry about the magic. The land's veins were like those in their bodies. When those veins were severed, they spilled and wasted their contents. The land itself, said Cerberus, wasn't physically ripped open; the schisms were more subtle. The unicorns could feel the veins ripped open, could feel the magic pouring away but couldn't tell where it was going. They could feel the way that some of the sundered lands (because they were *somehow* sundered; Cerberus kept contradicting himself) almost tipped to the side and, absent a connection to the veins, poured what magic they had into nothingness. The unicorns would go to sleep in Mead beside neighboring land, whole and intact, then wake the next morning to find it still whole and intact, but changed into a completely different place. There were entire areas where walking from one spot to another was like walking through fog, except that the fog felt like fear and ephemeral nothingness rather than fog true. These fog-covered areas shifted and left behind something like a patchwork. Grasslands bordered oceans. Mountaintops moved beside sweeping plains. A few years later they'd reshuffle, and land would shift again.

Eventually the movement ceased, and the world settled into the configuration it had now. It was different from what Edward had known but was at least stable, with familiar grass underhoof.

Edward asked how much time had passed, but his answers were different dependent on whom he asked. He was only sure that there had been generations of humans, and that none of the other unicorns seemed the least bit surprised to find Edward fully grown. All of his old friends were now adults, too. Cerberus was very much like Edward, only slightly larger and with a slightly smaller horn — a significantly pleasant turnaround, given how Edward had only a nub through his colthood. Edward's wingspan was also slightly wider, and when he finally did fly for the first time, he found that he was also slightly faster and a bit more agile. Cerberus seemed annoyed that Edward had surpassed him in one fell swoop, but other than that their friendship went on as it always had.

It took weeks for Edward to ask his appies about Adam and Eve. His answer was the same as he himself had concluded: Nobody knew how his grappies had perished, but everyone knew that they had. Edward's Grammy and Grappy were the original holders of unicorn magic, and their departure

from the world had changed that magic's feel. The distrust and animosity directed at the old unicorns had vanished in death. All of Mead had found the respect that Edward had felt for his grappies all along. Their memorial (funeral felt like the wrong word; there were no bodies, and they seemed to have returned to the Wellspring months before it was held) was a massive event. Every species from the surrounding lands sent representatives. Elves, trolls, ghryst, and even xombies came to show their respect. Cerberus told Edward it was fascinating to watch: all of the warring species in one place with their heads down, showing respect to the progenitors of the magic that allowed them to exist. Only the humans didn't attend, but at that time, nobody was surprised or bothered. At the time, humans weren't magic and had still been considered highly unintelligent. They and their horses rode to the horizon and watched the gathering from a distance, seeming to wonder at the ritual.

And there was another thing, Cerberus added. On the day the Mead elders decided to hold a memorial for Adam and Eve, a tiny black sapling began to grow at the top of the central hill. The sapling grew, and by the time two weeks had passed and the funeral was held, the small black sapling had grown a single peach whose weight bent the petite tree in half. When the funeral was concluded, the peach fell from the tree and immediately began to rot into the ground. The tree shriveled and retreated into the soil like a snake backing up the way it had come.

Edward quickly fell into Mead's familiar rhythms. He was older and had to break the still-engrained habit of clinging close to his appies and abiding by their schedule. Unicorns of multiple generations tended to live together regardless of age, and Edward was able to reclaim his old place in his rebuilt home without interruption. Beyond that, Edward tried to remember that he was no longer a colt (which was difficult at first but grew increasingly easier through the passing years) and became quite involved in Mead culture. Little had changed from the old days other than one very significant difference: the unicorns now considered the humans very worth paying attention to.

Adam's words were true. Humans were *fast*. In the time since Edward had left Mead, somewhere between fifty and one hundred generations of humans had lived and died. In that time they had built cities and settlements, exemplified by The Realm. They'd clustered and learned trade. They'd created machines made of wood then animated them with the magic

they had learned to harvest from the surrounding land. It extended beyond the driverless plows that David had told Edward about. They had driverless carriages, washing boards that didn't require hands to clean fabrics, smith hammers that were hot when they struck metal but cool in the smith's grip. And there was more. Appallingly, humans delighted in having magic think for them. They created magic pigments and painted walls then somehow turned them into what looked like windows — except that instead of looking out onto the other side of the walls, these windows looked into artificial realities. Sorcerers were charged with designing pictures to appear on the walls, and those sorcerers who could create the most compelling artificial realities were the most valuable members of Realm society. Nobody knew what magic the sorcerers were using to create their visual stories, but it bothered the unicorns. Whatever the magic was, its purpose was pure pleasure.

The Unicorn Blessing — the governing body that led the society — now sounded like Grappy. The others didn't seem to realize it, but for Edward, almost no time had passed. Just a short while ago by his own internal timeframe, unicorn society had shunned Adam for his heretical beliefs. The Blessing now repeated those beliefs as if they were their own. They said the humans were using too much magic, that they were separating pleasure-generating light magic from pain-causing dark. Unicorns used both types, but humans were only using one. They used magic to make life easier, and more pleasant, to further distract themselves. Human society was trending toward a sort of permanent bliss, and that made them dangerous.

The farther humans paved the road toward paradise, the less likely they were to embrace the dark magic required to balance the light. Three times now, the balance had skewed so significantly that the unicorns were forced to send representatives into The Realm. The humans saw these as invasions because the unicorns used force to wrench the pleasant magic from the humans' hands. But the change never stuck. It took only a few dozen generations, and the humans would return to their old ways. Each time, they rediscovered the trick — and the addictive nature of white magic — faster. Each time they managed to amass better defenses when the unicorns came to set things right.

For a while, factions in the Unicorn Blessing had disagreed over the so-called human problem. Some wanted to shepherd the humans, as Adam had.

Some wanted to keep doing as they had: keeping an eye on them then stepping in when the balance between light and dark grew too skewed. Some wanted to eliminate them. Cerberus was a vocal proponent of the last option, and his arguments were eminently logical. He said that they were invasive creatures that threatened every other living thing, and that when a weed threatened to swallow a garden, you had to pull it out or let everything perish. Because every speck of life ultimately returned to the Wellspring, Cerberus found no real moral objection to their elimination; human lives were short, barely there, and the unicorns would simply be returning them to their source sooner rather than later.

Edward didn't agree and argued with his old friend over endless dishes of a beverage that was new to Mead — something Edward told the others he'd brought back from his travels called "apple brew." Apple brew was actually a human drink from The Realm. Edward told this to no one then laughed as Cerberus drank his brew and argued that the humans had created nothing of value.

It bothered Edward to find himself on the human side of things, but with Adam gone it also seemed fitting. If Cerberus got his way, the humans would all be gone. And while they were a problem as a whole, plenty had value as individuals. David had grown into a man, and whenever Edward visited him, he saw what a fine man he'd become. The spark was still deep in David's blue eyes, and whenever Edward was near him, he felt the same connection he'd felt on their first meeting. There was something in the human king that wasn't in many of the others — something that kept the great white unicorn returning to the castle to both offer and (he'd never admit) *receive* advice. David ruled The Realm fairly, and that fairness never faltered no matter how many greedy humans tried to seize what belonged to others.

Edward asked David about the magic. He tried to explain the idea of light and dark, and how both were needed for balance. He told the king that The Realm was using too much light and not enough dark, and told him that if it continued, the worlds could fracture again. But so much was a leap; Edward didn't know if partitioning of magic had caused the Great Cataclysm or not, nor did he know if the humans had caused it through their actions or if it had been something else. David certainly didn't know, and neither did any of his advisers. He always listened to Edward, though, and tried to take his concerns seriously. But each time, he failed to enact any

change. The Realm was a kingdom of free merchants, where each made and grew what he or she chose and traded it however they wanted. The only way to make any sweeping change — say, to limit or eliminate the use of magic — would require the act of a strong fist. David wasn't a strong-fisted leader and was always fair. He couldn't destroy the livelihood of the magic harvesters, or the magic cart makers, or the sorcerers who created entertainment on walls with magic pigment. Discussions always ended in stalemate, with David agreeing that the issue was a problem but unsure what he could possibly do about it.

Cerberus and Edward met over brew. Cerberus urged decisive unicorn action — now, before the problem worsened. Edward went to David and told him what Cerberus and the others were planning. David agreed that it was a problem then admitted that he could do nothing without risk of becoming a tyrant.

Decades passed. The unicorns changed little, but every time Edward visited David, he was much older. In what felt like no time at all, David became an old man with white hair and a beard that held onto a surprising amount of dark strands. He was in excellent health until the end but was mortal, and couldn't live forever. His children grew to middle age and had children of their own. The second generation was large, and the third even larger. The fourth generation was largest of all. By the time David finally returned to the Wellspring, The Realm's citadel was swarming with old men and women, their ambitious middle-aged children, and the pitter-patter of David's great grandchildren's tiny little feet.

Power fell to David's oldest son then quickly to *his* oldest son. In the blink of an eye, Edward's connection to The Realm changed entirely. He was made to wait for a word with the king. He was looked at askance in the street. More and more people seemed to remember that the unicorns had thrice marched on The Realm, whereas in David's days of plenty they had found it easy enough to forget.

The Realm became an unfamiliar place, and Edward began to see the strings that had always been at work behind David's reign. David's answer to his children was always the same as his answer to Edward: *I don't know what I can do.*

With David gone, glossed-over conflicts between siblings quickly rose and festered. Two of his youngest had been fighting over land south of The Realm, where a river delta created a particularly fertile patch of land, but

David had never solved the conflict and so the wound had festered in a farce of peace. One of David's grandchildren wanted to tax the use of magic, but rather than clearing it with the king, he simply instituted a small fee, due to the castle. By the time David discovered the levy, it was too late to stop it, so he'd let it go — much to the consternation of several other grandchildren who felt that the first was getting more than his fair share of the kingdom.

Petty tyrannies rose, all exactly small enough to warrant no action.

Too much magic was being used, but once David was gone, none of his successors were willing to listen as Edward warned them.

Every house soon had a wall painted in magic pigment. The stories inside them started seeming familiar. The same went for magically bound volumes that the humans read out loud to one another. There was one that featured a big bad wolf who blew down the houses of pigs. There was another about a small man with a funny name, who tricked a townswoman into giving up her baby.

The old conflicts within David's family festered for so long that they simply faded into the background. It was like the family forgot that disagreements and resentments could be solved and simply grew used to them. When a royal wanted to do something, he or she did it. Others didn't agree, so they said nothing and let it go, unsure what they could do about it anyway.

By the time David's great grandson William took the throne, The Realm's feeling had gone from animus to banal. There was a time when it seemed The Realm was threatened by the unicorns' quiet menace and wanted to gear up to fight back. There was a time when the dirty looks Edward received in The Realm's streets had reached an intolerable level, and the unicorn was certain that the city would soon stop allowing him to enter. He'd been sure a fight was coming; he'd been sure that one day the royals would send him away as an enemy of the state, then war would rise and a fourth unicorn incursion would be at hand. But instead of being sent away, Edward suddenly found himself welcomed with big, dumb smiles. They invited the unicorn to eat extravagant food off of elaborate, magic-etched plates. They gave him fancier, sparkling versions of apple brew. They invited him to parties where the humans would dance in fancy clothes. Kings and queens grew fat then found magic solutions to their obesity and

again became thin. Peace reigned on the surface while royals, merchants, townspeople, and traders stabbed at each other from behind their backs.

A moving picture show was created that featured a magical cat who could disappear behind his smile. Bound volumes appeared at so-called booksellers, featuring a unicorn who was ridden by a human.

Edward reported back to Cerberus. They drank apple brew, and Edward felt guilty while drinking. Cerberus's animosity toward The Realm seemed to have dissipated. Edward was tired. He was tired of being so accepted in the human city, tired of how humans with difficult lives seemed pacified enough by their entertainment to walk the world with ever-present smiles. He asked Cerberus if he still wanted to march on the city, and Cerberus gave a small equine shrug and asked if Edward would bother raising armies to march on a marshmallow.

Edward found himself wanting to fight but not knowing what he could possibly fight for. There were no sides. There was only peace.

"I thought they were upsetting magic's balance," said Edward.

"They are," said Cerberus. "But I don't know what we can do about it."



CHAPTER 27

EDWARD SEES THE LIGHT

The Unicorn Blessing room was a place to hold council, but it wasn't really a place. It was a network of magic that allowed unicorn leaders to meet without being unduly influenced by the world around them. The practice of meeting in the network had been started just after the Grand Cataclysm, when changes in the land and world made magic unpredictable.

The room the elders had created was ashy gray, lit with a muted light that came from the air itself. For the first few minutes, the unicorns' horns seemed to glow. Their horns were the source of the magic place, and it took time for the illusion to let them forget that their minds were somewhere imaginary. After those first few minutes passed, they were just normal white unicorns in a gray room with smooth walls and floors, not unlike a well-lit cave fashioned from a synthetic material. The unicorns normally formed a rough circle in the room, and whoever was speaking moved into the circle's center. This time, Edward stood by himself to one side as the others formed a semicircle across from him. Because he'd been kept in the dark, and it was time for him to finally see the light.

The first unicorn to speak was one of the oldest — a mare named Fiona who wore her mane cropped close, causing it to bristle and stand almost erect.

"The humans are tapping the magic veins," she said.

Edward almost faltered on his feet. Nobody tapped the veins. They gave magic to the lands, and trying to directly access them would be the height of stupidity.

Fiona nodded, watching his surprise. "They've invented a drill, and initially tried using it in their castle basement. We did not know that they were doing this but later found a member of the royal family walking the hill trail suffering from magic poisoning. We didn't know humans could even accept that much magic. Before his head cleared, we got the story out of him. He said the humans realized that magic was dangerous when accessed directly, so they immediately tried to plug the hole in the castle and, of course, realized that repairing a vein is not like filling a hole. So they moved out of that part of the castle. The hole is still there."

“Leaking,” said Edward. He looked around the gathering, noting how all eyes were on him. This wasn’t a roundtable discussion. They were here to inform him, and only him. The old unicorns in the semicircle seemed to have known this information for a while and, judging by their faces, had taken their time to tell him because they apparently felt conflicted. Cerberus was the only young unicorn present besides Edward, his white form almost vanishing between the blindingly white elders on either side. Of course he’d be in the know; he was the leading authority on the so-called human problem. But even Cerberus, in their regular talks, had said nothing.

Fiona nodded. “Yar. It’s still leaking. But that’s not even the main problem. The problem is that the humans did not learn. They moved the drilling operation outside the castle, in the other direction from us, farther down the vein — probably because they didn’t want us to see what they were doing. They managed to run a pipeline. We don’t even understand *how* they did it, but they did. We’ve gone out and seen it ourselves. They’ve capped the hole with a pipe then shunted the pipe to The Realm as if they were pumping water rather than magic. The technology is beyond us.”

“Technology?” Edward wanted to laugh because the poorer quarters of The Realm still used horses for transportation and to pull carts and plows. But then he remembered the paint that made moving picture shows on the wall and animated puppet shows he’d seen on large stages. Entertainment was one area where the humans had excelled in their *technology*.

“Yar. They’ve done this three times that we know of. The arrangement is systemic, routing magic to three different areas of the city. What that means, well ... ”

Fiona looked at Edward, not finishing her sentence. As he looked back at her and the other elders, he realized why he was here despite being far too young to be in council. And he understood why Cerberus was here, and what his old friend might have recommended.

“You need me to help you understand the humans,” he said.

A sagging-joweled unicorn beside Fiona spoke up. Edward recognized him as Clarence the Divine. “You are the only unicorn who has spent significant time in The Realm. You have a bond with them.”

Edward shook his head, looking around the ashy gray room. “I had a bond with David.”

“And the others?”

“The others mean nothing. I will not be returning to The Realm.” Edward told the elders about how the city had started to sag into decline, how its upper class had grown decadent while its lower class was poor but pacified, as if by a drug.

“You must,” said Clarence.

Edward looked at the old unicorn, but Fiona spoke next.

“Edward,” she said. “You are an ambassador, like Ulrich to the trolls. We never meant to have an ambassadorship with the humans, but your connection with the royals has made one possible. We need you. The situation has caused a problem, and now we must address it.”

“You mean the leak,” Edward said. He turned to look at Cerberus, silently sending anger to his friend. They met almost every other night for friendly conversation. And he’d revealed nothing? The longer Edward watched Cerberus, the more irritated he became. He may have been the one who’d convinced the Blessing to bring Edward in, but he’d clearly done so only when he had no other choice. Now the humans were cutting holes in the world’s already-diminished magic veins without any knowledge about how to seal them closed — rerouting the magic for their own selfish means. They’d waited too long. Now it might be too late.

“That’s part of it,” said Fiona. “But ... ”

Edward took a deliberate step toward Cerberus. “March on them, then,” he said, his voice thick with spite. “You always wanted to march again? Fine. Do it. You wanted to exterminate them and return them to the Wellspring early? Fine. I will not argue against it. I do not care. They have become everything my grappy feared, and nothing of what King David was. But I will not help you. You stood back, refusing to engage. Lack of conflict softened The Realm. Your refusal to engage in any conflict with them — even verbal conflict, as I have been urging — has only made things worse. It’s as if you never learned the lesson of light and dark magic. They are two sides of a coin, meant to spar and churn. And yet you — the proud unicorn race — have refused to see that.”

Edward held his tongue, wanting to add a final thought: *Just as you refused to see it when the dark peach tree grew in Mead, then banished Eve for piercing the veil.* But these were Edward’s elders, and he was in a place he shouldn’t be. He’d gone too far already.

“It’s not that simple,” said Cerberus.

“No? March in. Burn their city. Kill them all, just as you’ve always wanted to — because it’s *what must be done*. Right? Noble Cerberus, always looking out for us while holding all the cards himself. Then, once The Realm is in ashes, find the leaks where they’ve tapped the vein and seal them.”

Cerberus’s lip twisted, but he held himself in check. He was either refusing to engage because he was among elders or because he realized he’d been wrong to keep Edward from what he knew. Edward wasn’t sure which.

In a steady voice, the big white unicorn said, “We can’t just do that, Edward.”

“Because it’s wrong?”

“Because it won’t solve the problem.” Cerberus gave Edward a long look to make sure he saw that his friend didn’t think any of what he’d said was ‘wrong’ at all.

“Edward,” said Fiona. “You’ve been to their city many times. You’ve seen how The Realm has changed. What does their royalty promise its people?”

“Peace,” said Edward.

“What else?”

“Nothing. All they do is *exist*. The poor till their fields, but the rich allow their fields to be tilled. I assume the three pipes you mentioned go to the three fiefdoms ruled by David’s three most ambitious great grandchildren — other than King William, of course. The lords are Niles, Beatrice, and Penelope.”

“Lords?” said a unicorn Edward didn’t recognize.

“It’s an honorary title, irrespective of gender. And while the royalty in The Realm seems benevolent, Beatrice is actually the most ruthless of all three, proving that tyranny is not limited to the species’ males. But yar, there are three, and each has their hierarchy, and in each it’s the same: a do-nothing upper class and a content lower class doing whatever work the magic can’t do or isn’t abundant enough to do yet.”

Fiona asked, “Why are they content?”

“Because the only reason they don’t have enough magic to till the lowest fields is because they’d rather use that magic to make themselves happy and comfortable. They will till fields if they can use the magic instead to play lute music through a small magical cloud that follows them

in the furrows. They will build walls that could be built magically if the same magic can be used to paint those walls with magic pigment to show them stories. If they have found ways to tap the veins, it is only a matter of time before they will have magic build the walls as well. This you can count on. Humans want things to be easy. *That* is what the people demand from their rulers.”

“Tell me about the stories,” said Fiona.

Edward cocked his head. She was much, much older than he and Cerberus but a full generation younger than Adam and Eve. Edward had been listening to Grappy and Grammy’s stories since he was a colt, and those stories had included tales of people being ignored and cast aside for their beliefs. Now Grammy and Grappy’s beliefs and fears were being vindicated, and Edward couldn’t help feeling resentful.

“No,” said Edward. He glanced at Cerberus then back at Fiona. “You tell *me* what you meant when you said the leaks were just part of the problem.”

Fiona sighed heavily. She looked at Clarence and then at a unicorn across the semicircle with a loose upper lip. They both nodded.

“We’ve known for a while that there are other worlds, Edward. Same as you described upon your return.”

Edward shook his head. “And yet you pretended not to believe me,” he said. “You told the others I was crazy.”

“It was necessary. The other worlds deserve their own existence and don’t want our interference. The fact that you somehow ended up crossing at least two or three is troubling. You may have set things in motion that you don’t or can’t understand. They don’t like our incursions, Edward. They might have thought you were there as an act of war. And because time moves differently in those worlds, the fact that time has passed here is no indication that we may not yet be facing a threat.”

“What do you mean, incursions?”

“Not by unicorns,” Fiona said quickly. “But during the Cataclysm, so many of the borders blurred. At first, we thought that it was just our world shifting, but it was actually all of them. The Cataclysm shook the world like a bag of bones. Some other species figured that out — on both sides of the border. Traffickers began to ferry between the worlds, but the others saw it as an attack. There is dark magic in some of those worlds, Edward. Across all the worlds, light and dark are in balance, but there are worlds that are

predominantly light and those that are predominantly dark. Ours, especially as it's centered on Mead, tends to be lighter. But there are others ... ” Fiona gave a small shiver. Edward found himself thinking of the Dark Forest. And strangely, he found himself thinking of how even the darkest of dark didn't make him shiver like Fiona.

“What does this have to do with humans in The Realm?”

“We think that in the days of the Cataclysm, humanity received a spark. Or mayhap the spark was there first and was ignited by what the Cataclysm opened; we do not know. But The Realm did not perish in the flood. It survived, same as us. Its citizens built boats and rafts even after the waters were up. They rebuilt when the waters receded. We believe that agents from other worlds made contact with the humans, or perhaps curious humans somehow found their way into other worlds, although that seems less likely.”

“Why?”

“Because our understanding today is that only magical beings can cross borders,” said Fiona. “But regardless of how it happened, we do know the humans *made contact* with those other worlds. They *became aware* of those other worlds.” She swallowed. “Somehow, then, they began to harvest energy from them.”

“Like siphoning magic?” Edward fought to hold his temper. The Unicorn Blessing didn't have a responsibility to keep him informed of everything they knew, but they *did* have a responsibility to protect Mead. If what Fiona was saying was true, the problem had been growing worse for a very long time, and they had known. Why more concerted efforts weren't made to stop it, Edward couldn't understand. He'd had a connection to The Realm for over a hundred human years, and at the beginning, when David was alive, that connection had been very close. They could have told him all of this a century ago, and he could have investigated when it would have been easy. Now something worse had happened — something Fiona hadn't even gotten to yet — and only once the field was burning had they sent out a few unicorns to draw water from the river to douse it.

“Like that, yar,” said Clarence. “But it's different because in this case they are taking a kind of life energy. You've seen the *stories* The Realm plays on their walls and in their bound volumes?”

Edward nodded.

“Well, Edward, you’ve been in The Realm on and off for a long time. Have you ever met a human among them who seemed capable of creating those stories?”

Edward thought about it. Sometimes, unicorns invented stories at grand gatherings, and Edward had tried to bring the tradition to David’s kingdom several times following Goliath’s defeat. He’d thought the humans simply weren’t interested in the unicorn ritual, but now, looking back, it seemed more likely that they had nothing to say.

“They’ve been stealing them from the other worlds,” said Fiona. “Overtly, I mean. You know the connection to the Wellspring, Edward. We all have it, but so do the humans. They are from the same place; they are instances of magic that come to the surface for a while and are imbued with the same non-magic kind of magic that is in all living beings. In the natural order of things — and here I mean the time before the Grand Cataclysm — humans can access the Wellspring indirectly, and because we believe the Wellspring speaks to all worlds, it means they would draw inspiration from those stories as if they came from inside their own minds — but also it would seem to come from somewhere else. That process is difficult, and it takes practice and effort to hone the connection. Among unicorns, Quentin from the east is perhaps the most talented at accessing the Wellspring source. Early on, there were humans who could do the same.”

“Okay,” said Edward. He was still angry but now intrigued. He’d certainly had boluses of information enter his head before and had wondered where they’d come from.

“But when the Cataclysm occurred, it became possible for worlds to directly connect, assuming a magic carrier could move between them. We believe that when the worlds were still liquid, the humans realized they could harvest their *inspiration* directly, without needing to search through their minds to find it. They bypassed the Wellspring. And once they had their taste of that pure source, they began to lose their ability to access the indirect source. They became addicted, and their natural instinct to take the easiest possible path in any endeavor worsened the tendency. Even that would have waned with time, when the worlds eventually solidified and the damage from the Cataclysm healed — had someone, somewhere, not kept a tunnel between the worlds open.”

“They’re still able to access those other worlds?” said Edward.

Fiona nodded. “Apparently, they have been all along. We’ve suspected it for a while, but now we know it’s true. And *that*, Edward, is why we have called you here. It’s why we need your help.”

Edward felt the biggest point coming. It loomed over the gathering of elders in their imaginary meeting room like a boulder waiting to fall. Concern was carved onto every old face. Even Cerberus, normally stoic, looked worried.

“What’s happened?” said Edward.

“You’ve said that ‘creativity’ in the Realm has been deteriorating,” said Cerberus.

Edward nodded. During their discussions, Edward had read his old friend a litany of reasons for being disgusted with The Realm, reasons why he’d never return. In those sessions, he’d told Cerberus about how even the population’s opiates were beginning to disintegrate, meaning that the people were duped into being placated by more and more mindless entertainment. The same stories appeared over and over in slightly disguised forms. Classic moving pictures were recreated image by image as if the sorcerers running the shows had run dry and could only ape what had already existed before.

“Yar,” said Edward. “So what?”

Fiona shuffled nervously. “Cerberus told us what you told him, and it bothered us.”

“Why?”

“It could mean that they’d lost their connection to the other worlds,” she said. “That the hole they had been holding open had finally closed.”

Edward looked into Fiona’s big blue eyes. “But that wasn’t it, was it?”

She looked at the ground then back up. “As elder unicorns, we have the ability — if we work together and focus — to open doors between worlds. Recently, we did so and sent an emissary, even knowing the risk of how the action might be perceived.”

She looked to Cerberus, the emissary. Edward looked at Cerberus as well.

“And how did those dark things greet you, Cerberus?” Edward asked, a humorless smile creeping onto his large lips. “Are they now banging down the gates, ready to storm in and murder us all?”

“They didn’t greet me at all,” Cerberus said, shaking his big white head. “When I arrived in the other world, they were all gone.”



CHAPTER 28

TUNNELING THROUGH WORLDS

Edward was the ambassador by default. It sickened him.

But the way Cerberus explained things rang true, and as furious as Edward was at the Unicorn Blessing (in general) and Cerberus (in particular) for keeping the entire issue from him until the situation was a possibly unsalvageable mess, the matter's gravity slapped him hard. Cerberus described the Dark Forest exactly as Edward had seen it — the shadowy, moody little village, the mansion with the beanstalk out front, the house of an old witch found in disarray as if ransacked by greedy little children. He described the path and the clearing at the other end. He'd also visited other places that sounded familiar to Edward, including what sounded like the path he'd walked with Saul the piper and a land that had recently been flooded. All had been empty. There were houses, and the detritus of lives — possibly interrupted in the middle of meals or daily living. But the creatures were gone.

The vacancy of those other worlds bothered Edward to his core. He'd felt a reluctant kinship with the people and things he had met, despite their differences, and wondered where they might have gone — or if they'd been stolen away.

"Where did they go, Cerberus?" Edward asked his friend later, after the Blessing concluded on an indecisive note. Edward knew only that he was the only unicorn who had managed any degree of connection with the humans and that he, therefore, was the one who would be forced to reach out now. The prospect was uncomfortable. The humans hadn't been honest or open with Edward for over fifty years, and it wasn't long before that that they'd been openly hostile. They seemed past the capacity for honesty. They were like sponges, not intelligent beings. Edward felt that he could conquer them simply by walking into The Realm and donning the crown, as long as he could keep them amused and entertained as he did so.

"Those in the other worlds?" said Cerberus.

"Yar. Do you think they were ... dried up?" The two unicorns were sitting outside Cerberus's haven, drinking apple brew. Edward took a sip.

"Dried up?"

"Used. Like the humans sucked them dry."

Cerberus shook his head. “How would that happen?”

“They’re stories, right?”

“Just because something exists somewhere else doesn’t make it unreal,” said Cerberus. He lowered his head and took a drink. “No, they’re beings, like us. I don’t know where they are, but their absence isn’t good. Ideally, according to what the elders say, worlds shouldn’t know of each other. The Cataclysm changed that, and if they’ve gone, it means it never returned to normal. Something was leaking from their world into ours, and they noticed. I imagine it was like being robbed, over and over again.”

“Wouldn’t they fight back?”

Cerberus nodded. “Yar, I think they would.” There was a beat, then he corrected himself: “I think they *will*. But for now, I think they’ve backed away.”

“Why?”

“If you were being robbed, wouldn’t you back away? Put up your defenses? Mayhap move somewhere farther from the crime?”

It didn’t quite make sense to Edward. From what he’d seen, the people in the Dark Forest were proud, but he’d seen no indication that they were being robbed — other than by the town kids. If there was one thing to protect and move away from in the Dark Forest, it seemed to be children.

Edward said nothing. Instead, he looked out at the range of hills he’d once crossed when walking to Grammy and Grappy’s haven, between Mead and The Realm. In those days, The Realm had been nothing more than a cluster of huts. Back then, according to the elders, the humans had just begun using their minds to invent things. Magic had gotten in the way by making them comfortable. Their comfort had made them start thinking less. Then the Grand Cataclysm had occurred, and afterward the humans had rebuilt. By then, the magic had broken open and spread everywhere. The fallen border between the worlds had given humans direct access to stories and tales, allegories and inspiration. If that door had stayed open, the human dream would indeed have come true: they’d be well on their way to an early Mead paradise, where everything was easy — where nobody wanted, nobody struggled, and nobody got bored ... but where life meant almost nothing.

“I don’t want to go back, Cerberus,” Edward said.

“You don’t need to do much. Just sell the idea to the humans. We’ll do the rest.”

“Do you think they’ll let us do it?”

Cerberus laughed. “*Let* us? They’ll *beg* us. The people of the other worlds can’t run dry, but The Realm’s connection to the stories already has. This would open those worlds back up.”

Edward shook his head. He didn’t understand the plan or why Cerberus had proposed it to the Blessing. He didn’t know why the Blessing had accepted, and didn’t like it. It flew in the face of good sense. Cerberus wanted to use the elders’ magic to prop open *many* doors into other worlds, not just one. They knew their world touched many others (Edward remembered the cat’s idea that the Mead and Realm were in the “axial world,” which stayed in the center), and they wanted to build permanent connections between their world and as many of the others as possible. They’d give The Realm access to stories from other worlds — and, supposedly, diffuse what was quickly becoming an escalating situation.

“It’s a bad idea,” said Edward. “You build a network of inter-world tunnels and machines under The Realm, and the humans will take over. They’ll ferry people back and forth. Story worlds will become vacation spots. The royalty will see to it because there is money to be made.”

“They’ll do it anyway,” said Cerberus. “But if we don’t get involved and guide them, they will do it like humans. They will dig and bore and rip. They’ve already opened at least three holes in the vein, and we cannot close them without invasion. Even if we do that, we’ll never discover the truth, or recover elements The Realm may have stolen from those other worlds. If we do, and get everything back where it belongs, the humans will still continue to plunder. It is not in their nature to be and let be. The Realm is one settlement. There are others, and there will one day be more. We have marched on The Realm three times in your absence, Edward, and our time has meant nothing. We take things away, and they evolve with new ways to steal. It’s astonishing the effort they place in their theft. They have created a society where no one needs to think or tax themselves, yet they could only form that society through acts of genius. Every time we set them back, they find a new way. There was discussion about the veins in the past, and everyone said that the humans would never be able to tap them. And of course they have. What will come next if we don’t intervene? Will they rip veins along their length? Learn to harvest magic and transport it in tanks? Will their pipes drain the veins until there’s nothing left, leaving the flow of

magic into the far reaches to diminish to a trickle? No, this is the way it has to be if we are going to allow them to live.”

Edward took a long look at Cerberus. He doubted the unicorn would have any problem simply eliminating the humans. Cerberus was practical above all else, with a frightening pragmatism. There was no morality or remorse in matters of pragmatism. He didn’t have colts and fillies of his own, but if he did and famine came, it was easy to imagine him letting them go hungry if the more important members of unicorn society required food in order to be strong and govern. Cerberus had the kind of mind that believed in triage, in acceptable losses, in the ends always outweighing the means. There had never been anything special about their friendship. Edward had always been an asset to Cerberus and had never been in his way. If that changed, Edward would have to watch out.

If he was willing to meet the humans halfway — which was decidedly more difficult and less ideal than killing them off — then there had to be a logical reason for *not* killing them off. Mercy was never part of Cerberus’s decisions.

“What are they to us, Cerberus?” Edward said. “Why aren’t you arguing for us to destroy The Realm?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late,” said Cerberus without a note of shock. “Eliminating them now won’t solve our problem. There are also those who feel we need them. We are light; they are half-dark — you know the argument because Adam made it. They need to live. And if they live, they will do damage. They are like colts and fillies running through a field of eggs. They are going to destroy things by the clumsy stomping of their hooves. So the only thing that makes sense is for us to minimize that damage. How can we keep them from ripping the veins entirely open? How can we keep them from sundering the worlds again? And the answer is that we must settle. We have to help them, so that we can control them.”

Edward met with King William the next day, and William readily agreed to Cerberus’s plan. He offered his men to help with construction, but the unicorns declined. Edward had thought the humans would insist that they be involved in the process because the first tunnels would need to be built directly beneath the city, but instead the king just waved good-naturedly and thanked the unicorns for their help. Edward was shocked enough to try again, offering regular tours and updates. Cerberus butted his head into Edward’s side when he suggested it, but it was unnecessary.

William declined again, saying that the unicorns knew best because they were magical, and asked them to please let him know when they were all finished. Then the king left, practically prancing, to host a dinner and grand ball.

With permission granted, the unicorns began building a network of massive tunnels under The Realm, carved out of the rock core beneath the soil. Cerberus and the elders explained that they needed only to pierce the worlds under The Realm, and that the tunnels themselves wouldn't exist in this world or in any of the others. Each "station" would poke through a different part of a different world (or a different part of the axial world), but the space between them would exist solely within the magic.

The tunnels, when Edward toured them, nonetheless looked like tunnels. They were plainer than plain, with no decorations or adornments. They looked like featureless gray rock, perfectly circular after being hollowed by unicorn magic. There were magic means of conveyance intended to shuttle users from one station to another through smaller, darker passages, but the place felt like a beehive. Edward was supposed to be the human liaison, so Fiona the Elder told him to say nothing of what he saw in the rock warren that appeared to be underground — but which, apparently, existed nowhere. She explained that he should tell the humans only that the tunnels were "tunnels" and that they had "means of transportation" at the stations. The humans would take it from there, impressing themselves upon them.

"What do you mean 'impress themselves upon them?'" Edward asked.

"After enough hooves have trod across any area," said Fiona, "they will wear a groove in solid rock. That's the nature of this magic as well. The humans will shape this place through their expectations. Each mind that comes through will add a little more, and soon it will become a place like theirs. It will change over time, subject to the expectations of the majority of people who use them, and will remain that way until their collective will shifts it into something else."

It made little sense to Edward, but he was much younger than Fiona and the other elders and, as far as he himself was concerned, much younger than even Cerberus, whom he'd grown up with. He'd had a bit over a human lifetime to learn the nature and shape of his own unicorn magic, but Cerberus had lived through countless human generations while Edward was away.

So he trusted Fiona, and Cerberus, and the unicorns traveled into The Realm and entered the tunnels and made the tunnel system larger. The humans let them go, always throwing them dumb smiles and acquiescing nods but never asking questions or wanting to enter the tunnels themselves. Yet.

Piercing worlds was delicate. Fiona explained it in terms that sounded similar to Eve describing her reason for eating the peach.

“Pressure will build if we don’t give them a way to vent it,” she told him. Cerberus walked on ahead down the tunnels. Edward and the elder held back. “The humans have been infected as if by a disease. They cannot unlearn of the magic they felt from the other places. If we do not give them a way to reach into those other places and draw *inspiration* — though it is not actually inspiration — they will grow more twisted. They have tapped the veins already. They will tap more. Humans are creatures of unintentional spite. If they are frustrated in one way, they will take their anger out on something else. They want to be comfortable and pacified more than anything. If we do not provide that, they will tap more magic in search of new ways to be entertained. That entertainment will have no substance, so they’ll tap it further. And further.”

Edward shook his head in the dimly lit tunnel. “I still don’t see what one has to do with the other. The other worlds with the magic, the magic with the other worlds.”

“Humans are strong, Edward. Not always physically, but in will. It is a trait that I could admire if it weren’t so dangerous. They simply do not give up. They have had a taste of inspiration yet haven’t learned the trick of using it themselves. They’ve enjoyed comfort without effort, and want more. If they cannot be sated by their picture shows, bound books, and melodies, they will turn to the only other thing they have discovered that makes life simpler. They will stop working entirely. They will use magic to try and make their pictures worth watching again. But the veins hold power true, not inspiration. The attributes of the deeper mind come from the Wellspring, not from veins below the ground. Magic has intention, and can make images dance on their wall. It makes them think the images come from the magic, but they don’t. Magic responds to the images as it responds to everything else.”

“But the other worlds,” said Edward. “They won’t want the invasion. They won’t want the doors open. They won’t want to be stolen from.”

Fiona looked toward Cerberus then resumed walking.

“They’re already being stolen from. We think it’s why they’ve retreated.” She looked over. “The humans will think they control this place. It will mold itself to them. Their will and intention will decorate the walls and floors. The shuttles we’re building to move between stations will begin to look like human shuttles — probably carts like they use in The Realm. But we made these tunnels, so they will require the presence of a unicorn to function. They will never be able to use them without us.”

Edward paused. Fiona walked a few steps farther down the corridor before stopping. Something clicked. Edward had thought they were simply building the tunnels because they wanted to control the doors, but really they wanted to control the humans.

“You want to make them dependent on us,” he said.

Fiona turned back to look at him. “Just like your grappy wanted, Edward.”

“Adam didn’t want this.”

Fiona tossed her head, from the tunnel’s one end to its other. “Not this specifically, nar, but he wanted partnership between humans and unicorns, and that’s what this must be.”

“Why?”

“Because they bear watching, Edward. They are too unpredictable. If we do not shepherd their access to magic and other worlds, they will use their tenacity to take what they want anyway. We can either stand back and let it happen, as we have so far, or find ways to become a part of it. *It will happen either way*. But slipping our hand inside the glove committing the crime will allow us to steer it. Yar, the other worlds will be angry if they know. But they *won’t* know because the theft is now crafted with care. The humans will fumble and make a mess, but we can break in without being seen. We can help them get what they want, in a controlled way. They want to be lazy? Fine. They want to take their tales from the lives of others? Fine. They will find a way, so that way must be *our* way. They will not open doors without us.”

“They will grow soft. They will be unable to function without us.”

“They are soft already. There will always be something they cannot function without. Don’t you see? That ‘something’ must be us, Edward. Only we can guide this race. They are necessary. They carry seeds of nobility and seeds of darkness in equal measure. But it makes them their

own worst enemy. We must guide the hand that holds their most dangerous weapons.”

Edward was shaking his head slowly. He wasn’t disagreeing with Fiona. What she was saying seemed to make sense, and it did seem to reflect what Grappy and Grammy had asked of him in its own backward, twisted way. But still there was something about it that bothered him. It was indeed like playing with a weapon, and could destroy them as easily as it could save them.

“It’s a gamble,” he said.

The old unicorn looked at him. “Exactly, Edward. And that’s something the humans have yet to learn. Forward progress is made through gambles and risks. If all paths are safe, there is reason for none. I am told you walked through the Dark Forest while wandering. Is that true?”

Edward looked up. He hadn’t told anyone other than Cerberus the intimate details of his journey. He felt briefly betrayed, but slowly nodded.

“I know the place,” said Fiona. “Coming through means you chose to. Am I right?”

Edward thought of the clearing and the forking paths. He had indeed chosen it. The path into the Dark Forest had been terrifying, and the other path — sunlit and beautiful — had seemed perfectly safe. Even as he’d made his choice, he hadn’t understood why.

Edward nodded.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You must have some idea. Darkness, for a unicorn, is a choice — like creating this tunnel system.”

“I wanted to go home.”

“So why didn’t you choose to avoid the dark places and stay on the path that looked more like home?”

“I don’t know.”

Fiona smiled slightly. Her look said that even if Edward claimed not to know why he’d chosen the harder, riskier, more frightening path, he truly did. So did she.

“There will come a time when you will face darkness again,” she said. “Now you know what it is. You know it is not truly your opposite. You know that it is just another facet of the magic. You know that it is opposite but not evil. You know that it is different, not reprehensible. You know that

the truest way to face darkness is to stare it in the eye and head into it, not to turn your back. You took a risk, Edward. You took a gamble, relying solely on your gut — and this as a mere colt. You can't know how unique that makes you. It was a spectacularly intuitive act of bravery. And in the coming days, we will need that bravery again.”

Edward almost wanted Fiona to continue — to connect the remaining dots for him — but she didn't have to and knew it. Instead of saying more, she turned and walked deeper into the rock, following Cerberus and the other unicorn crews. Edward allowed himself to lag, looking into the various branches, peering toward the open spaces at their ends that Cerberus called “stations.”

Edward looked at the growing network, trying to see it as a leap of faith on behalf of the unicorn population. No matter how long he looked, it still felt more dangerous than risky. They were giving the humans keys to innumerable worlds, and immediate access to other points in their own. They wouldn't be able to use the tunnels without a unicorn guide, but did it really matter? Fiona had said it herself: Humans were tenacious and never gave up. Were the unicorn failsafes good enough?

As construction proceeded, Edward's questions multiplied. The more he asked, the more Cerberus clipped his answers, steering Edward away from the subject and rolling his eyes. He told Edward not to worry — the entire Blessing was behind the project, nothing could change at this point anyway, and Edward's understanding was, frankly, not required. He was Ambassador to The Realm. That meant almost nothing. The tunnels could now be accessed without entering The Realm at all (though some crews always went in that way for appearances' sake), and getting human “permission” these days was about as difficult as getting permission from a basket of primroses. The job would be done in the way that was best, whether Edward got the details or not. He might as well just let it go.

Edward went to visit the tunnels and was turned away. He was told that the sections he wanted to see were being reinforced because they were unsafe. When Edward went to visit Cerberus on-site, workers said he was unavailable. Visits at Cerberus's haven were less frequent, and when they did talk, they said nothing of the tunnels. Edward asked Fiona and the other elders for answers, but they'd grown weary too, and sent him to Cerberus, who sent the unicorn home.

The project began to bother him more and more. Yar, it was a risk. Yar, it was a way of making the best of a bad situation that someone else started, by training humans not to use their access to the Wellspring. But if they were to partner with the humans as Adam had suggested, why not do it in the way Adam had *actually* meant? Why not move into The Realm and teach humans to use their minds and small amounts of magic in the right ways, not unlike how he had trained David? They shouldn't be giving humans their drug when they could control the supply. They should be weaning them instead. Adam had spoken of the human race as if they were gems. The other unicorns treated them like explosives. Humans were causing magic and inspiration to leak, and the unicorns wanted to build a reservoir and pumping station. Edward thought the unicorns should treat the disease's cause, not its symptoms.

Every time he tried to bring his ideas up to Cerberus, Cerberus changed the subject and assured Edward that the tunnels were filled with back doors that only the unicorns knew of. He said that the end goal was to return the creatures to the other worlds — to make them feel safe enough to return, so they could resume pouring their stories into the Wellspring and prevent the humans from tearing the worlds or magic further. That was all that mattered, and the right solution had to be the one that made it happen.

Months passed as the tunnels were expanded and developed. Edward began to feel like Grappy. He knew what should be done, but no one would listen. The world was a dark peach tree about to erupt.

When the Seven Nation Army arrived on The Realm's doorstep, it did.



CHAPTER 29

THE SEVEN NATION ARMY

They came under banners, each representing one of the Seven Nations. Their weapons were not raised, but they came in force, each nation's contingent over a thousand strong. Most didn't need weapons. Through their unique magic, they *were* weapons. And with nearly ten thousand beings and creatures arriving at the lip of the tunnels, their intention was clear. They'd already pushed in through the gates past the unprotesting humans. They'd already crowded out the merchants' carts and tradesmen. Their feet trampled the castle lawn. Realm guards watched them blandly, holding spears and tridents and swords, wielded with the malice of brooms. They had not come to discuss. The Seven Nation Army had come to command.

Edward heard them coming. He was sleeping late, knowing there was little he could do with the day other than graze and pretend he mattered to the forward progress of his kind. When he heard the tromping of boots and bare feet, he bolted up and ran. The winding trail through the hills and past the former site of Adam and Eve's haven seemed to stretch farther than it ever had, despite his longer legs. He considered using his magic to fold the distance but didn't want to try; he was too new to folding and might have made the distance worse.

His skin prickled as he crested the final hill, bringing the haven's old grounds into view. The Realm, with its tall castle spires, was visible across an enormous distance. Again he considered folding, now that the path was straight, but it seemed faster to thunder on than to stop and concentrate.

Minutes passed. As the horizon rolled forward, Edward began to see more of The Realm — the length of the castle's towers, the tops of buildings, the wall itself. And with the wall, he saw what was at the gate — a seemingly never-ending line of bodies in colors. He expected a fight. He was denied both quarrel and entry. The Seven Nation Army blocked the gate like a plug. An enormous red beast with gigantic horns on its head held up a hand and ordered him back. Edward lowered his head, and his horn glowed. Three sorcerers stepped in front of the red thing and held glowing palms to match. Edward cycled down, stood back, and waited to see what was next.

He began to call the other unicorns, but there wasn't a point. Many were already in the tunnels, and those who weren't had already gotten calls from the unicorns who'd seen the Army. He could feel them approaching. Their tread sounded less panicked than his; the unicorns in the tunnels who'd spoken to the Army must have reported something that Edward hadn't caught.

He waited. And watched.

The Seven Nation Army watched Edward back. Not with malice, though he almost wished they would, because their casual glances made it clear that he wasn't a threat. After a while, after Edward began to feel the unicorns arriving behind him, the Army began to withdraw like a long snake backing out of a hole. He watched the uniform colors and banners as they emerged.

Warriors in blue.

Damsels in white.

Jesters in orange.

Legends in red.

Royals in purple.

Sorcerers in brown.

Creatures in black.

Each nation was in a line five wide, each over a thousand strong, each holding magic that Edward had felt but never experienced. Every face was straight and determined. Edward felt his own face fight to stay strong as he met them alone.

The unicorns came from behind. Fiona, the elder on scene, led the procession. Cerberus, who oversaw the project, trotted beside her. Behind them were the hundreds of unicorns who had been building the tunnels. It had to be all of them. That meant the tunnels were deserted. Edward felt vulnerable. He hadn't built the tunnels, but his race was responsible. He imagined a small party from the Army entering now, poking the doors and ferrying through stations, easily opening the portals and gasping at how completely the unicorns had betrayed them. They had pulled back — apparently to regroup and arm up — because they'd been robbed. But what was underground in The Realm wasn't just a transgression. It was a planned, systematic, thorough system of infiltration. It was a promise to the Army that both the unicorns and humans planned to continue robbing them blind for millennia to come.

The other unicorns arrived, and the two groups joined together. A few horns began to cycle and glow as the elders shouted commands to stand down. Unicorns were very powerful and nearly immortal, but *very* and *nearly* wasn't good enough in the face of ten thousand beings that were angry and in possession of unfamiliar magic. The intention was always to avoid conflict. That's why the tunnels were supposedly built. But that plan relied on the thieving hand remaining hidden. Now they'd been caught, and there was no way to say whether the worlds could be salvaged.

A man in a long gray robe emerged from the Army's ranks holding a long and gnarled staff. His robe had a hood. He pushed it back as he stepped toward Fiona, who stood at the head of the unicorns. He had long, wavy gray hair topped with a pointed, wide-brimmed hat. On his face was a tangled gray beard and deep blue eyes the color of a unicorn's. He walked forward casually as if stepping into a chat. But his old, wrinkled countenance did not smile, and his eyes, deep in their cradles of wrinkles, watched the unicorns with confident appraisal. His robe differed in color from the brown of those behind him, but the man was clearly a sorcerer.

"I am Rowen," he said. "This party has chosen me to lead them, and so I have."

"I am Fiona," Fiona answered. "I speak for the unicorns."

Rowen nodded. "You know why we've come."

Edward looked at the ranks of the Army. Every being radiated a breed of magic so strong it wafted like heat from their bodies. Fiona didn't respond; she either didn't perceive Rowen's words to be a question or was being stubborn.

"You have transgressed," Rowen said. "We have noticed your holes in our worlds." He gestured across the Army behind him. "*All* of our worlds."

"Yar," said Fiona.

"We have come to investigate."

Edward looked again at Fiona. She wasn't frightened, nor did she seem in any way surprised. She had arrived without hurry, as if trotting out to feel sky on her mane. She looked through The Realm gates. A group of humans was huddling, half-bent at the waist as if expecting to be struck. None came forward.

"Your fight is with them," she said.

Rowen looked at the cowering humans. The group shuffled back, each taking refuge behind another. They hadn't been called onto the carpet until

now; they'd simply come to watch and gawk. Fiona attempting to turn the Army's wrath on them was shocking. Edward could see a few begin to unhinge.

"With them?" said Rowen. "Oh no. I believe our quarrel's with you."

"They are the ones who caused the incursion that siphoned your riches. They are the ones who held the door open. They are the ones who took without giving back. We thought the borders had been sealed long ago, but they had not. Some have been traveling back and forth since."

Edward thought of the Sandman and Saul the piper. Were they to blame for this? It had never occurred to Edward until now, when Fiona's use of the phrase "traveling back and forth" had jostled his memory. Saul was a courier, the Sandman a gatekeeper. It had all felt very official when Edward had gone through as if the Sandman's gate were a sanctioned means of crossing borders. But there was so much he didn't know.

"You've been building the doors," said Rowen. "You have been helping them."

"We've been trying to control them."

Rowen shook his head. He walked toward the humans, leaving the Army in place. The humans looked as if they wanted to flee but seemed too terrified to move as if frightened that the sorcerer would strike them down if they tried.

"Who is your leader?" he asked.

The humans said nothing.

Rowen turned. "So these are our great foes? I could lay waste to this place myself." He paced toward Fiona. "Tell me," he said. "Did you think we wouldn't notice? You are a unicorn, and there have been unicorns among us from time to time in the past. You know magic. You know how the borders work, and you know not to purge them. You know how hard it is to do so, now that those borders have re-solidified and the magic has again become whole. You must have known we'd feel it. Yet you have sided with these creatures to prey on us unseen, when unicorns, more than any race, know you have the same access to us and our magic through the Center."

Center. He had to mean the Wellspring. There was something happening, deeper than Edward had realized. The parties all understood the rules and how things worked.

"Yar, we knew you would feel it."

Edward snapped his head toward Cerberus. His eyes were locked on Edward, not Fiona and Rowen. Yar, he'd known it too.

"So you have betrayed these people. You wanted us to do your dirty work, and have intruded on us in order to do it." He shook his head slowly. Behind him, the Seven Nation Army stirred. Giant beasts with boulder-sized arms and gnarled faces crouched and rose as if stretching or eager to strike. Warriors touched the hilts of their swords. Damsels fingered delicate daggers with one hand, concealing the other, surely reaching for something deadlier.

"Maybe," said Fiona.

Rowen walked closer, a few steps from Fiona. "What are you hiding?"

"We are hiding nothing. The humans have leeches magic from you. They have stolen your people in some cases and dragged them into our world from others. Some have gone traveling in your world and become lost." She projected her voice toward the humans then continued more loudly. "They will not even step up to defend themselves. They will not apologize nor make amends. They are a disease. You may lay waste to them, then challenge us if you wish."

"You will fight?"

"We will fight." Fiona again projected her voice toward the humans. "But you must fight us through them. With them in front, as shields. Your weapons will find them first because we will hide behind their quivering bodies. You will have to burn their town to reach us. You will have to ..."

"Enough," said a voice.

A man walked to the front of the humans. He was holding a hoe, but Edward could tell that he wasn't a farmer. He was a nobleman. He was wearing a crest that marked him as a member of the royal line, but his shoes were dirty and even across the distance, Edward could see calluses on his palms. Why was he working the dirt as a nobleman? And why was he working the dirt at all in a community with three magic pipelines entering the city?

Rowen turned toward the man. "Who are you?"

"I am Cyrus."

"And who *are* you, Cyrus?"

"I am human. That is enough."

Edward had all the pieces to see who the man was. He wore the royal crest, meaning that he was kin to King William. He also had David's

piercing blue eyes, and Edward could feel that same small tug in his chest he'd felt when he'd first met David in almost the exact place as he stood now. Looking around, he realized that the other unicorns could feel it too. He didn't know precisely who Cyrus was, but he knew what mattered. He was descendent of David, and he'd inherited what none of David's other descendants had: nobility that couldn't be granted by birth.

"Did you know, Cyrus? Do you understand what we speak of?"

"My family has overstepped our bounds. I allowed it to happen."

"*You* allowed it to happen? Are you the leader of your people?"

Cyrus shook his head. "No. My brother is King. But I knew what he was doing and did not fight. I did not go to the unicorns, who might have been able to help. I did not step into the tunnels as they were being built." He looked around. "The same as everyone who stands before you."

Fiona smirked. Edward saw the unseen piece. Fiona hadn't considered this a gamble. She'd wanted them to get caught. He found himself remembering Adam, and what he'd said about how conflict was what ground the gears of the world.

"Then you want to fight," said Rowen.

"I do not want to fight," Cyrus replied. "But I am willing to accept what I've done, and if you choose to fight me, I must."

It looked like Rowen and Cyrus might be building a bridge, but a man with wild blond hair in bright gold and red robes burst past Cyrus, almost knocking him to the dirt — King William, waving a scepter with menace, and yelling something incoherent. He seemed to realize that no one else was yelling or fighting with him, so he backed off until, a moment later, a contingent of royal guards came forward with weapons in hand. They'd lost their usual vacant expressions. Edward realized the king had already whipped them into a frenzy before leaving his castle. Ironically, he'd only come forward with his men after believing the standoff was about to end peacefully. If the Seven Nation Army had attacked, the king could have remained in his stronghold and waited until the war was over. Not fighting meant concession, and the king would have none of that.

Duly surrounded and protected by his guards, the king turned to face the gathered crowd. He ignored Cyrus and addressed the masses.

"These people have come to take what we have!" he blurted. "We built this city! We *rebuilt* this city! My great grandfather snatched control from the tyrant Goliath, and we have grown and prospered and built lives here!

And now they want to come in and turn it all off?” He pointed an accusing finger at Rowen, his rage still turned on his people. “Do you understand? They will not turn around and leave. They will take all that you have! You will become slaves! You will toil through your lives, breaking your backs! Our prosperity will vanish if they sever our connection to the magic. We will not be able to build! We will be forced back in time! Your every comfort and pleasure will be ripped from your life. No picture shows. No books. No new creations, no moving forward. We will move backward. Do you understand? The Realm will cease to exist, back to the warring tribes we were before, huddled over fires with nothing. Are you really willing to roll over?”

The people stirred. They looked shocked, but shocked was better than inert.

“GET UP! Meet this Army! Don’t just cower! Do your home and land mean nothing?”

Cyrus stepped in front of his brother then raised his arms and addressed the crowd himself.

“You do not have to fight,” he said. “Why fight? Look at them, then look at yourselves. You cannot win!”

A skinny woman spoke from the front. “Then what do we do? Just give up everything?”

A man beside the woman shushed her, throwing apologetic looks at the Seven Nation Army. Loud enough for the others to hear, he said, “Amelia, look at all of them. How could we fight?”

“The unicorns will help! They dug the tunnels.” She repeated herself, yelling toward Rowen and the Army. “*They* dug the tunnels! They wanted to help us! Anyone will tell you. They were making it possible for us to ... do whatever you don’t like. How could *we* have done it? They’re responsible! They have to fight on our side!”

“They won’t fight for us, Amelia,” said the man. “Since when have unicorns ever fought for humans?”

“They’ll have to! Those ... things are going to fight the unicorns the same as they’re going fight the rest of us!”

Fiona stepped between the humans and Rowen. She looked at one then the other.

“We do not fight *for* anyone,” she said to the woman. “If you fight, you fight for yourselves. If we fight, we fight for ourselves. Two sides to every

coin. You chose to take without giving. You have chosen ease without suffering. Now your choice has been taken away. Now you will either suffer to lose what you have or suffer in battle, but *you will suffer*. You need it, if you are to mature as a species. If you are to learn to live alongside us. If you are to learn to live with *anything*. But that hasn't been how you've lived, people of The Realm. Originally you had to fight for survival. You had to prove yourselves worthy and grow. But since the day you discovered magic, you have become an island unto yourselves. You have built fortifications and a wall. You let that wall and that island protect you. But you didn't isolate yourself in your needs. You poked holes in the wall so you could have *more ease, more magic, more joy*."

She walked closer to King William, her horn pulsing a dull red.

"Your joy is killing you! Your complacency is killing you! We would be content to let you die, but you have threatened the world with your touch. You have sundered veins. You have prodded holes in the very worlds themselves so you could be entertained and comfortable. We believe you created the imbalance that caused the Grand Cataclysm and shattered the worlds in the first place. But what are we to do, Realm? We can't do without you. Because as much as you need strife, we do too. You are ours."

Behind her, the thing with arms like boulders — a soldier in the nation of creatures — mumbled, "*We can do without them*."

Fiona looked at the thing then at the humans. "They can. And they want to. Unless you stop your theft."

"Speak quickly, unicorn," said the creature. "You have helped them to steal."

"We have attempted to guide them."

"Toward theft."

Cerberus stepped up beside Fiona. "What would you have us do?" he said to Rowen and the waiting creatures. "They are like colts. They cannot be trusted. Or left untended. We believe they split the worlds once. That affected us all."

The big creature's voice was a growl. "Then eliminate them." He paused and added, "*Guardian*."

"*And the guardians know best!*" Cerberus snapped at the thing. "Who are you to question us! The magic was born with us, not you! You aren't even real! We are real; we were first, and we know best! Do not question

our judgement or how we shepherd the magic! It is *ours* to dispense as we wish!”

Rowen tipped his head toward Cerberus. Edward felt his heart take a leap. The sorcerer was calm, but Edward could read him fine. His magic felt strong, and he was not as placid as he seemed. Over and over when they were colts, Cerberus’s pride and arrogance had landed him trouble. For the briefest of time, his pure white coat had even started to gray — not because he was intentionally allowing his pure magic to pollute, but because he wanted to show a righteous elder that he was correct and wouldn’t be swayed.

“*Yours to dispense?*” the sorcerer repeated.

“*Ours!*” Cerberus blurted. “Our kind created yours!” He made a visible effort to calm himself then continued with only slightly less animosity. “You feel you have been trespassed on. And you have — by *them*, which is where your quarrel lies. And you have the right to require restitution. You have the right to demand what you want ... from *them*. You only need to look at the white color of every unicorn here to know that none of us have nefarious aims. You may not understand why we feel the need to keep the humans alive or why we chose to help them build tunnels in order to tame their wildness to means within our control. You may not understand our intentions, but you may not question our decisions regarding Wellspring magic. We were created as its guardians, and we, in turn, created everything else!”

Cerberus was treading on thin ice. Some of what he was spouting to the Army was considered true; some was either lies or arrogant supposition. Adam and Eve had told Edward that something else created the magic and unicorns, and that the same something else had *used* the unicorns to *help* create the rest of the world — or, presumably, *worlds*. It was not universally agreed upon that unicorns couldn’t be questioned, though most felt that way. But Cerberus was presenting it all as fact, and Edward, who wasn’t blinded by indignation, could feel how the Army was reacting.

He stepped toward Cerberus. Both Cerberus and Fiona looked at him, as did the humans and the encroaching Army’s frontline.

He looked at Cyrus, King David’s worthy descendent, and spoke to the humans.

“What do you stand to lose?”

“Nothing,” said Cyrus.

“Everything!” said the woman named Amelia. “Everything we have is powered by the vein magic. Everything we know comes from the stories delivered by courier!”

Edward resisted the urge to ask about the courier. He thought again of Saul, wondering if the piper had been permitted to move back and forth between the worlds or if he’d done so secretly.

“Stories,” Edward said. “You will lose stories. You will lose your entertainment. You will lose your amusement. That is all. Isn’t that a fair tax for the prevention of war?”

Cerberus was eyeing Edward as if he were a traitor. Until Cerberus calmed down, he’d see this as a matter of pride. Unfortunately, the humans seemed to feel the same way.

“Sure, just roll over!” said King William. “Do what they tell us, am I right? And then what? What comes next, when they want something else? You saw how they came in! In rows and rows of soldiers, as if to trample us! They did not send an emissary. They did not stop at our gate. They did not ask. They came in force. They pulled workers from the tunnel. There was no discussion. It was to be their way, from the start. They are here to intimidate us into surrender!”

He turned around, raising his hands, trying to rally anger from his people. He slapped his hand on a vendor cart beside him. Edward could see a light glow, like a mirage, at its front, and knew that magic would allow it to move without being pulled.

“This is ours! We built this place! We found magic and used it, like unicorns find grass to eat. Races before us cut trees and dug for resources to get what they needed. We did the same! We had a vein below us, and we harvested it. The worlds were open in The Realm’s earliest days, and we borrowed what we found. We opened trade with others, the same as elves, trolls ... even the mighty unicorns! And when others came offering more magic of the kind we’d sampled during the Cataclysm — the kind that made it easier to think, that made us comfortable and inspired — we accepted that trade. We paid for what we received!”

The huge red beast with the horns stepped forward, breaking the Army’s ranks. Several of the unicorns turned, their horns starting to glow. To King William, he said, “*We* were not paid.”

“That is not our problem!”

“We were *harvested*,” the red thing countered.

A man at the front of the humans stepped forward, behind King William. He said, "What we used was information. How can that harm you?"

"Information is what we are. Your stories are our lives."

"Once a story is told, its magic belongs to everyone!" the man yelled. Edward, still in the middle, found himself remembering the Sandman, who'd asked the unicorn if he were real or merely a tale. He'd implied that it was one or the other, and that taking something from any world into the axial world meant it would be lost from its home.

"Maybe," said the big red thing, taking a huge step toward the man, "I should remove your soul ... because the energy inside of it belongs to everyone."

Edward tried again, this time actually rearing up and kicking his forelegs to drive man and legend away from each other. They both stepped back. Edward looked over at Fiona. To his surprise, the old unicorn had stepped back as well, no longer sure. She'd tossed the flame into this pile of twigs, but it didn't seem likely to spark and fizzle. The Army was angrier than she'd anticipated. The Realm was standing up for itself rather than learning the lesson. And the unicorns, who'd planned to make the humans' continued reaping of other worlds possible, were caught in the middle. And as magic as they were, they were outnumbered. Even if they took to the sky, they couldn't evade ten thousand soldiers — many of whom could fly themselves.

"STAND DOWN!" Edward bellowed, his wings subconsciously flared out at his sides. It made him look bigger, his chest seem broader. He heard his own voice and found it deeper than normal, more resonant and commanding. Then, when everyone who'd been arguing fell silent, he lowered his voice and continued. He found himself alone in the center. Fiona was beside her daughter with the rest of the group. Even Cerberus had slinked back, his blue eyes flashing with odd yellow highlights.

"You are fools," Edward spat, speaking to the humans. "You fought to pass us in number and equal us in intelligence. Yet once you had everything you needed, your sloth betrayed you. You outsmarted yourselves. You found out how to make things easier then turned your attention toward improving that ease. You stopped trying to get better and instead spent all your time trying to become more satisfied. You have been warned about separating white from dark magic, yet you refuse to stop. Tapping a vein is not like

cutting down a tree, and you dagged well know it. Tapping a vein is like splitting the world to its Core. You knew it yet did so anyway because you are addicted. We have come into your settlement three times, and you knew we would return to quell your transgressions, yet still you committed your violations. You knew that your minds were meant for touching the Wellspring, but you didn't want to tax them. So when you found a way to soothe your lives without actually using your minds, you took it. You did not accept trade innocently. You knew the stories you received were from another place. You knew you were upsetting a balance, especially after the worlds had stitched, yet you did it anyway."

Edward turned to face the Seven Nation Army and Rowen. Behind the sorcerer, the colored banners of the Seven Nations flapped in a light breeze. He realized something he'd missed before: They knew about men like the piper because everyone in the forest had accepted that he'd come from somewhere else and returned whenever it suited him. Interestingly, Edward was sure they didn't know about the Sandman, who controlled it all.

"And *you*," he said to Rowen, "are blind. Willfully blind. I visited your worlds — the Dark Forest was one — during the time when the other worlds were accessible. I saw stories I already knew. You belong to yourselves, but your tales belong to no one. You understand the order of things, and know that the magic of your lives filters through the Wellspring. You knew that there were leaks, and used them yourself. I knew a man whose job it was to ferry back and forth, and everyone knew of him. But that was travel and exchange that suited you, wasn't it? A way to breach the worlds to your favor, but you pretended it couldn't happen in the other direction. When I arrived back in this world, it was many years after the Cataclysm — many centuries after the world borders had supposedly sealed. So how could I return? You knew that unicorns could open tunnels between the worlds, too. Because I have seen your stories in the unicorn world — stories that I've never seen reflected in the Wellspring. What did you trade, Rowen? What did you receive from our world in exchange for the holes you permitted — as opposed to those holes where you focus your anger?"

Rowen stuttered. "We ... I know of nothing ... "

Edward turned to the unicorns. "And you — and by that I mean *we*, myself included — are too dagged proud to understand what we can control and what we cannot. What kind of a dangerous game was this? Were we

really supposed to believe it was all about helping the humans? Was this really about controlling their misuse of magic? Was it really beyond our ability to cut them off?” Edward shook his head, finally voicing the one thing he’d never been able to make fit no matter how many times he spoke to Cerberus or Fiona.

“They would have adapted, wouldn’t they? They would have learned to think for themselves. But there’s more to this, isn’t there? Another thing that the great unicorn race felt the need to keep hidden because it knew best?” He stared at Fiona, Clarence, and the other elders. “You kept it even from the rest of us, didn’t you? Because that’s how it is with unicorns. We’re superior in every way other than our sense of security in the world.” His eyes found his appies in the crowd, ruffling their wings. “I was told growing up that unicorns were proud. But we aren’t proud so much as arrogant. We dictate the way of the world. We are the keepers of the magic. And on and on. So we must keep secrets, right? Because how can we be *proud* unless we have something the others don’t have?”

Rowen dropped his staff. He stooped to pick it up, keeping his eyes on Edward.

“What do you have?” said the sorcerer. “What secret are they keeping?”

“I don’t know for sure,” said Edward. “But it seems to me that the worlds *must* stay open. I heard the old stories when I was a colt. I felt how borders meshed when I walked between them. I saw how the water drained after the flood. Where did it go? None of the worlds are big enough for all there is. My grammy and grappy told me before they died that magic had to circulate. They said that conflict was good, and that conflict came not only from anger but from difference. *Variety*.”

Edward turned toward the elders. “Why are the worlds so similar at root, Fiona? Everyone I met spoke our language. There are languages that differ even in this world, and there must be plenty of other languages out there. The only real way to explain it would be if the path I walked was actually a well-trodden path.”

Fiona said nothing. She didn’t move. Because Edward was right.

“What caused the Cataclysm?” Edward asked. “You know, don’t you?”

“Yar,” said Fiona. “It was your grappies.”



CHAPTER 30

EPIC FAIRY TALE BATTLE

Edward shook his head. He must have heard Fiona wrong. The unicorn elders were all staring, their equine faces expressionless. The world started to spin. Edward felt himself becoming light on his feet. It had to be a joke, but wasn't. It could only be wrong, and it *had* to be, because he'd know it if his grappies had caused the biggest disaster in the history of all the worlds — the disaster that returned them to Wellspring.

Edward turned to react — how, he wasn't sure — but didn't have a chance before the huge red horned thing charged, suddenly wielding a mace it pulled from nowhere. It was fast, but Edward's heart had started to flutter, and magic flew from him without conscious effort. An umbrella of sparks poured from his horn as the thing brought its mace down. The blow was intense; the stone ball at the mace's end cracked in half on Edward's shield and fell to the ground, leaving the legend holding only a handle.

The beast roared. The Army's front line, keyed to strike, started forward as if shot from a canon. Edward saw Rowen try to raise his arms and hold the Seven Nation Army back, but they were already in motion, and once the front line had engaged, the rest followed like water shot from a spigot.

Edward held his umbrella, now using conscious effort to shape it into a full, circular shield, just in time for the red thing to kick at it, jarring both Edward and the shield backward and into the city's wall. He fell to the dirt and righted himself for the strike, but the world and his attacker both vanished in a wave of warriors, damsels, legends, creatures, and the rest. Spells began lighting the air, and shaking the umbrella around him.

He couldn't hold it. He *shouldn't* hold it. He should fight. His shield was nudged again, and again he rolled, this time coming up just inside the wall surrounding The Realm. With room around himself, he dropped the shield, knowing he couldn't do anything in offense while shielded in defense.

The others had erupted into battle. The humans were getting knocked to dust; spells of the Seven Nation Army were striking people and turning them to smoke. They hid behind the unicorns — the closest thing they had to allies, if only through guilt by implication. The unicorns allowed it, now forming a wall of solid white.

In the middle of it all, Edward could see Fiona yelling and scrambling, taking bludgeons and healing instantly. He could see Clarence; he could see his appies. Several of the unicorns tried to take flight, but the battle was too tight, and they couldn't spread their wings. Edward's appy, Jack, blasted some sort of concussive spell from his horn, briefly clearing space around both him and Diane. The unicorns stood at a stagger so they could both spread their wings then were airborne as a few who'd run to the periphery did the same.

Immediately, a herd of black-clad gargoyles from the Army's ranks tore through the sky, their ugly faces churning and changing, forming snarls and drooling. There were other things — hairy creatures with long curled tails that had wings like bats — that followed. At first the flying unicorns fired spells, but the Creature Nation's soldiers were too fast, too agile. They dodged then returned fire with small spells of their own. Gargoyles swarmed like locusts. The unicorns couldn't overwhelm them; there were simply too many.

Jack flew directly at them and Edward, still shell-shocked, stared up, and held his breath. The big unicorn wasn't trying to engage them. Instead, he broke hard and threw his wings forward, clapping creatures against one another between them. Gargoyles fell to the ground like black rain.

Edward shook himself off and charged forward, feeling terrified but moving anyway. He'd never used his magic aggressively and didn't know how, then realized he didn't know how to form shields either, and that the one that had saved him had simply sprung out of him through need. He remembered long, long ago lifting that first stone with his adult horn to throw it into the pond. It was the same as he used his magic on a daily basis; he just intended for something to happen, and it did.

Edward thought at a group of assassins from the Nation of Warriors (dressed in blue; it was becoming a cyclone of color), and something came out of them, faded red in color, knocking a hole in the gathering.

Edward ran into the gap. It closed behind him. He saw the big red thing with the horns coming, but it was knocked down by a trio of running unicorns. The humans were useless but surprisingly (and admirably) fearless. They ran behind the unicorns with their weapons, mostly just garden implements. There was a shout, and Edward turned (parrying and erecting shield to deflect an assault of white-robed damsels with daggers) to

see Cyrus leading a band of men and women. All had — and here, Edward had to double-take — *slingshots*.

He looked at the band of humans for long enough that a jester in an orange uniform impaled him with a long lance. The impact stung, white hot. Edward spun in place with the lance still in his side. The jester tried to hang on, but the stuck lance knocked him to the ground, where Edward struck him with a spell that felt like a fist. The jester was reduced to a swirl of white smoke, but then six more were on him, all swinging bolos overhead. Edward took the time to shake his head. The idea of coming after a unicorn with a bolo was absurd. He put on a magic hand and flicked them back, and the jesters flew through the air like motes of dust under wind.

The way cleared, and again Edward saw the band of people behind Cyrus. They must have been wearing the slingshots all along or had just rotated them into position at their sides, but now he could clearly see them, just as he'd last seen the same on David. At the slingers' left sides were slingshots in pouches. At the opposite sides of their bodies were smaller horizontal pouches that had to hold rocks or alloy balls.

Cyrus drew first. His hand was like lightning. Edward didn't think he'd ever seen a human move so fast and thought at first that his hands must be magic. They weren't, though; they were just very, very quick. The others joined him. Spells blasted over their heads, but they stood their ground without flinching. Right hands found the alloy balls, loaded, and fired in one smooth motion, over and over. Again Edward was speared, this time by a warrior's sword. Multicolored blood painted his side; he turned to fight, but the warrior was gone.

Creatures were already falling under the hail of the slingshot brigade. Shot after shot after shot, felling royals and jesters and legends. Many were magic and came up as surely as Edward had healed himself, but many stayed down. The slingshots, he realized, seemed to be magic as well. The balls weren't stopped by obstructions. Shields split. An orange-skinned witch ducked behind a building, and one of Cyrus's crew knocked her down anyway, the ball not remotely deflected as it passed through wall and stone and wood.

Somewhere in the distance, Edward could hear yelling that sounded like Rowen, telling the Army to stand down, but nobody was heeding the cry. The battle raged from the front lines, with the unicorns circling overhead. But only the front lines had engaged, and Edward realized that

once the rest of the Army began to fight, the unicorns and humans would be sunk. There were too many. It was a no-win situation. Right now, he could see rank after rank of the Seven Nations beginning to stir as they came to the fore and others fell in front. They weren't supposed to be fighting. But the three armies were too engaged in battle to stop and consider, even as elders among the unicorn armies circled above and screamed, yelled for them all to shield up and back off, hoping that calm would prevail.

Suddenly a cloud-like spell spilled out across the battlefield, and everything went silent as if all sound had been stolen from the world. Swords meet without ringing; punches landed without slaps or exhalations of breath. An explosive spell struck and unseated a behemoth, but no bang came with it.

"STAND DOWN!" boomed a voice above the silence.

The silence and then the yell surprised every combatant, and in the second of confusion Rowen slammed his staff into the ground. A great bubble spread outward from it, and as the bubble met the Army, all either fell or staggered back. Then, suddenly, there was only Rowen, standing in the middle of the battlefield with the three brigades spread out around him, laid flat like the petals of a blooming flower.

The moment broke. Hostilities ceased like a room of colts and fillies shamed to quiet by an angry elder's roar.

With the silence now voluntary — broken only by the surprised chatter and shuffle of all three sides — Rowen repeated, slightly less loudly, *"STAND DOWN! We have not engaged! There has been enough bloodshed and death. I command this Army, and we have not engaged!"*

The heads of the Seven Nations watched Rowen. His old features wrinkled with disapproval; his lips turned down. Swords found their sheaths. Daggers found their pouches. Staves and wands were put away. All around the battleground, winged creatures rustled down to stand in the dirt. The unicorns' horns stopped glowing, and Cyrus's group holstered their surprisingly deadly weapons.

Rowen looked at Edward across his parting Army. Edward looked at the unicorn elders, clustered into a tight knot.

The gray-robed sorcerer with his pointed hat and staff strode toward Edward. He stood before him, his posture relaxed slightly, and reached into his robe pocket. Edward flinched in readiness, but Rowen wasn't reaching for a weapon. It was a long pipe — too long for its pocket.

Rowen slipped the pipe between his lips. It lit without having to be lit, as he leveled his gaze at Edward.

“We should talk,” he said.



CHAPTER 31

THE GENESIS TREATY

“We didn’t want to tell you, Edward,” Fiona said. “We didn’t want to tell anyone. You must understand that what we withheld, we withheld for our race first and for you second. Neither argued for us to speak up.”

They were in the largest meeting place the unicorns had — a sort of semi-haven near the river that had hurriedly been enlarged by unicorn workers just minutes before. They needed the room; the place was the only physical location the Blessing ever used to meet when forced to meet corporeally. Now it held more than the Blessing’s seven unicorns. It held a single representative from each nation in the Seven Nation Army, plus seven humans, including King William and his brother Cyrus, simply to keep sides equal. Seven was a spiritual number, as was three. No one had ever said twenty-one was anything special, but three groups of seven couldn’t help but be lucky, and they’d need a lot of luck right now.

“Two more for even more fortune,” Cerberus had ridiculously added when he and Edward had come along.

Edward’s head was low. He couldn’t seem to pull his gaze from the dirt. He could sense Cerberus beside him. His presence was just a body on four legs, but to Edward it felt like judgment.

“You deserved to know, I imagine,” said Fiona. “Clarence and Rigby proposed telling you, after we found the location of the break and saw the signature of their magic. It was simple. The axial world, as we understand it, really is like an axle when there’s a tear — like a needle through a stack of cloth. A tear in the bottom of one world’s ocean, its scope magnified through the dimension, was enough to cover the rest. When the tear healed, the magic pulled what belonged in each world back into that world’s proper constitution — except for out-of-place beings like you, of course, who had will enough to decide what they were and where they wanted to go. But magic always leaves residue, Edward, and once our investigation was over and we’d found the source, we realized who had caused it.”

Edward looked up at the other unicorns. They weren’t kidding, and he didn’t think they were lying. There would be no reason to lie. The notion that his grammy and grappy were turning from pariahs to traitors in front of his eyes was crushingly shameful — not just to Edward but to the entire

unicorn race. Unicorns were proud and arrogant above all, and arrogance could only come from a sense of superiority — a surety that the unicorns knew more, controlled more, and were simply *better* than those around them. Adam and Eve had always been those who'd let the Darkness into Mead, but now they were the cause of the largest catastrophe to ever hit the worlds.

"Maybe they had a reason to do it," said Edward in a small voice.

"Of course they did," said Clarence. "To wash the worlds clean. That's all we can guess. Your grammy and grappy had been saying some crazy things before the flood. There's no way you could have known, Edward, because you were just a colt at the time. But they spoke of dying.

Intentionally returning to the Wellspring. They said they'd lived long enough. They could have kept living, but they said no one should hold magic forever — not even unicorns. We can just keep holding on and holding on, but they wanted to go. We think they wanted to make the decision for a lot of the rest of us. They kept spouting off about disturbances in the magic. Adam was crazy, Edward. He thought the end of the worlds was coming. He spoke of a new bubble — a new dark tree. It got worse and worse. Eve raised the alarm, running around talking to anyone who would listen. But there's a reason they lived all the way out in their haven. They could never fit in with the rest of us. Because although they started our species, they were our secret shame. I know you loved them. But you must understand that this had been brewing, and that we knew who they were. And when they'd been outcasts for long enough and nobody would listen to them rant and rave about the separation of the magic by the humans, and our own separation by default, well ... they took matters into their own hooves. It must have been both of them, working together. The world was enormous and would have been simple to open from above, but they were below so it had to take both of them, working together, opening a door where one didn't belong."

Edward began to kick at the dirt with his forehoof. He felt watched by twenty-two sets of judgmental eyes, all blaming Edward for his family line. There were fourteen beings present who weren't even unicorns. This felt private, but now the other species would know. Unicorns could keep a secret; they'd kept this one for untold centuries. But humans and the seven representative from other worlds would not. Adam and Eve would become one of their stories, distorted beyond truth and fairness. He'd been beaten

enough. The entire race had been beaten enough. Now they could move on and talk again about the humans' transgressions, but still Clarence continued.

"Once the rip was large enough, it was self-perpetuating and grew larger and larger. If you pierce a thin water sack with a knife, it will leak. But if the bag is big enough and you cut it wide enough, the force of the water escaping will widen the tear and rip the sack from end to end. That's what happened with the worlds. We see their magic signature through a scar in the sky, but beyond that is simply sunder. They knew what they were doing. Their original gash was huge because a small gash would only fill our oceans. They wanted to fill all of the worlds with water, and to tear holes across all that remained. Humans had unsettled the worlds. They'd run that needle through the stack by their separation of magic, as Adam and Eve were so concerned about. But those holes were minor, and it was through them that we first saw opportunities for trade with the Dark Forest and the other revolving worlds. We even discussed it with your grappies, but they were incensed. They said the worlds should be repaired, not exploited for trade. They said that magic needed to circulate, but that we were going about it in a perverse way. There were smaller, natural pores that allowed ideas and magic and stories to percolate from world to world. But these rips were big enough to walk through — to send emissaries and couriers through. Like the raconteurs."

Edward looked up. "Raconteurs?"

"We'll get to that," said Fiona. She looked out at the humans and the seven other beings, whom Edward had almost forgotten were in the room. To Rowen, who was representing the magic users, she said, "I'm sure you'll want to change that relationship."

Rowen nodded.

Fiona turned back to Edward. "The humans' misuse of magic had an upside. But it bothered Adam and Eve. So they left. They built their haven and grew increasingly ideologically distant. Dangerous, even. They stopped attending Blessing, despite being the founders." Fiona's big, blue eyes were almost pleading as if they wanted to apologize for his blood traitors. "We wanted them to stay. They were the first among us. They were the instruments of Providence. They helped to create Mead, and they were like appies to us all. But they were terrified, and they made us terrified — *of them*. So we let them go, and they continued to rage." She sighed. "As far

as we can tell, they finally decided to end the rips in the only way possible — to open them so far that they were unhealable. They took that needle and dragged it farther through the cloth, widening the purges. And the water came. And the water, through its force, did the rest.”

Edward waited to see if Fiona would go on, but she seemed to be finished. Finally he looked up, sensing Cerberus beside him. Had he known? During the tunnels’ construction, Cerberus had spent a lot of time at Blessing. He didn’t like the idea that his oldest and best friend (the friend who’d shut him out of the tunnel project, Edward recalled with displaced anger) knew of his shame before he himself had. Only it wasn’t just Edward’s shame — it was all of their shame, and Edward’s blood had caused it.

He looked up. Rowen the sorcerer had come forward, his staff tall at his side. His gray beard looked wise, like that of an elder unicorn. His wrinkle-bound eyes were serious but kind. They looked concerned, not judgmental. Edward had gotten at least one thing right in the tirade that had caused the battle to erupt: Rowen and his kind *hadn’t* been in the dark about the still-open doors between the worlds. They’d known about and supported at least part of what they’d come to complain about.

“Tell me the truth about the tunnels, Fiona,” said the sorcerer.

Edward looked at the old unicorn. There was no mistaking how Rowen had said her name. He’d only introduced himself earlier for the benefit of the Army. The two had clearly already known each other.

“We knew you’d find out eventually,” she said. “And when you did, we thought it would solve a few issues at once. The Realm was a problem. They didn’t know moderation, and the trade of the raconteurs wasn’t enough. Involving the humans early on was a mistake. They had to learn that there were consequences to greed and sloth. They had to see what they’d made and fight because of it. They had to take a stand or relent — to be forced into decision. Building the tunnels was not something we were trying to do in secret. You must see that.”

Rowen nodded. “I do now.”

The humans seemed restless, but the king didn’t know what to do, and five of the others didn’t appear bold enough to speak before he did. Cyrus came forward, his blue eyes and the language of his soul reminding Edward of a young boy he’d found sitting on a stone a hundred years before.

“Maybe it’s time you all-knowing, superior beings let us know what you were playing at,” said Cyrus. “You act like we have no minds of our own. You shove us from place to place. You don’t talk to us; you manipulate us into doing what your *grand aims* require. Did it never occur to you to speak with us? To open discussions?”

“We tried, but you never listened,” said Cerberus, his face forming a snarl. He’d been working on the tunnel project for months, studiously avoiding The Realm’s humans the entire time. Privately, he thought of them as animals. The one thing that nobody questioned of Adam and Eve’s heresy was that the humans, with their mixture of light and dark, were a problem. Cerberus took that opinion to its logical extreme.

Cyrus shook his head. “Are there no lazy unicorns?” He looked at Rowen, a beautiful dark-haired damsel, a broad-shouldered warrior with long golden hair, and the rest of the Seven Nation Army’s representatives. “And among you? There are no legends who do little? No magic users who would rather not rise to righteousness?” He looked at the representative of the royals — a crowned woman holding a scepter with an alloy blade at one end. “No nobles who lack nobility?”

Cyrus shook his head then began to pace the gathering’s center. “You have impossibly low opinions of us. I even understand why. It is sometimes earned. But there is also greatness among us, if you care to look. The curse of being how we are is that we must constantly fight between doing what is right and what is easy. We were given magic rocks, unicorns, and you told us not to use them. Couriers supplied us with stories, yet you judged us for not doing the hard work of ignoring them and drawing our own from ... from wherever they come from. Can you really not understand — you, with your unblemished white magic? We have both light and dark within us, and no inherent magic. We have a fight inside us that you don’t share. Yet there are some of us who win that fight, as hard as it is. The Realm could not have been built by idle hands, unicorns. There have always been great ones among us. But you didn’t seek them out. Are you really so blind?”

Edward almost wanted to speak up — to describe the feeling he’d had when encountering David, and now with Cyrus. There was something in these wild, lazy creatures, and an attuned unicorn could sense it like sun on a summery day. But he remained mute. He felt beaten. Who wanted thoughts from the descendent of traitors and saboteurs?

“You were an unknown,” said Fiona.

“Well,” said Cyrus, sitting on a rock in the corner of the haven, looking up at her with wide, studious eyes, “now we are known.” He waited for an explanation — for Fiona to move him from her pile of inert game pieces into the pile of players.

She nodded then began to explain. Only the Unicorn Blessing and Cerberus had known what she said next, so she spoke to everyone: to Cyrus, to his less-worthy brother and the other humans, to the representatives of the Seven Nations, and to Edward, progeny of the shameful creators.

“We’ve been watching as worlds heal since the Grand Cataclysm,” she said. “What isn’t widely known is that they never fully healed. They were like shattered ceramic. All of the pieces that could be found were found — by the worlds themselves, I mean; the worlds are their own organism with their own systems of defense and repair — but some of the pieces never quite fit, like a chipped edge in spite of patching. Those original holes were necessary because as I said, the floodwaters needed a way to retreat. But that happened quickly, and it took many more years for the biggest fissures to heal, and by then we’d already started to see that the needle was still more or less through the cloth — that the fissure was still there, now because pieces hadn’t quite meshed. We were able to find the largest areas and patch them as you would with clay, but the Cataclysm was huge, and hit the worlds everywhere, all at once, when the water sundered them. We couldn’t find them all. The water drained then kept draining. Fissures were originally easy to find because the areas around them were marked by dry rivers and drought. We found and repaired the tears, and the land’s lushness returned. But every time we think we’ve found them all, we discover more. The world has become like an alloy sieve humans use to drain water when cooking. When Edward returned with news of The Realm’s greed — which, unfortunately, is making things worse by tapping veins and pillaging the Dark Forest ... ”

“You could have told us it was damaging the worlds,” said Cyrus.

“We did tell you,” said Edward, finding his voice. He tried to sound angry because it was a drum he’d banged for decades, but he’d been banging to the wrong people. He turned to King William. “But you never listened.”

“Magic makes our city run,” said William. “We need time to adjust.”

“You’ve had all the time in the worlds!”

William started to retort but realized he was outmatched; his only support came from the five sycophants behind him. The shelter's seventeen other occupants would pounce if he said more, so he curled back and pouted.

"Anyway," Fiona continued, "we had the existing tiny rips and tears left over from the Cataclysm, and we had The Realm — keeping that needle firmly wedged in place, piercing all of that cloth. The veins got weaker, and the magic leaked, meaning it wasn't available to allow the worlds to heal themselves. When we listened to Edward, our ambassador to the humans, and watched The Realm's greed" — she gave William a look, daring him to contradict her — "we started seeing a way to control the humans, along with the damage. The worlds were going to leak. We thought if we could connect them in a deliberate way, we could ensure their slow drip was balanced. We told the humans we would patrol the corridors and provide them with the inspiration required, but there were areas that only we knew about. We established magic conveyances running between stations that could carry materials as needed, that could be converted to underground rivers or magic veins if necessary. Where the worlds ran dry, we could shuttle waters. Where there were leaks, we could provide a path of lesser resistance, encouraging the magic to leak *where we wanted it to leak* rather than somewhere else that we could neither find nor control."

"Why didn't you tell us, then?" said Rowen. "Why didn't you enlist our help?"

Fiona shook her head. She hesitated, and Edward understood. He knew her answer, and Rowen wasn't going to like it.

"*We* are the guardians of the magic," she said. Her voice was deliberately low, and it was obvious that she was conveying what must sound like an arrogant truth in the most timid way possible so as to minimize airs and leave only truth. "We couldn't trust anyone else to know the tunnel system's entirety. The Seven Nations all have their own magic, and there are kinds we don't fully understand. You could only see the system when it was finished, when we could be sure that you wouldn't be able to plumb past our protections. Only the unicorns could be able to know it all."

Rowen shook his head. He seemed irritated, but at least he also seemed to understand.

“If it worked, it would solve all of the problems at once. It would pacify The Realm and give it an outlet for its greed. It would perfectly balance the outflows from one leak into inflows from the others. At best, it would merely duplicate the natural pores. We had hopes that the system would actually improve the worlds — that it would allow for *more* circulation of magic in controlled ways.”

The royal from the Seven Nation Army — apparently a queen or a princess or perhaps a duchess — spoke next.

“Is it working?”

She was looking at Fiona, but Fiona turned to Cerberus.

“We don’t know,” said Cerberus. “It’s not finished.”

“What about the raconteur trade?” she asked. “Not the renegades or criminals but the officially sanctioned couriers of story magic?”

“The tunnels will be the safest way for them to travel,” he said. “Now that you know, we should stop using surface tears. Let us close them.”

Edward shook his head. His line might be heaped with shame, but he spoke up anyway.

“Raconteurs,” he said. “Story couriers. So you’ve allowed this to happen.” He looked around the gathering. Everyone here except for himself (and mayhap Cerberus) apparently already knew that The Realm and the other worlds had been trading the very magic that they’d been prepared to war over today all along, and that the unicorns had known and allowed it.

“There had to be circulation,” said Cerberus. So they’d told him after all. Edward found himself growing angry again. He’d always been more or less upbeat, always optimistic. But he’d been shut out of the tunnel project by his oldest friend, and he’d been made to feel a fool about the sanctioned, black market story trade. For unknown millennia, the unicorn nation had known Edward to be the grandfoal of world-breakers but had held their tongues, letting him believe a lie. He’d had enough. He felt himself harden, felt a wall wanting to go up. There could be no more starry eyes. No more vulnerability. No more naiveté.

“The circulation was supposed to happen through the pores,” said Edward. “Through the Wellspring.” He turned to the other unicorns and the creatures and the humans, using the only weapon he had left to protect himself: righteous indignation. “You pretend to help the worlds on one hand while ripping them on the other. And you wonder why the needle never pulled from the cloth? How dare you blame The Realm. They couldn’t have

done it alone.” Something dawned on him. He looked at Fiona and said, “That’s why you didn’t want to cut them off, isn’t it? Because you wanted to have your grass and eat it too.”

“The shattering of the worlds put us in touch with others that we needed to get along with,” said Fiona. “Everyone had to be kept happy. There are things at play you can’t understand, Edward.” She stared at him, daring his retort. The way she’d spoken about the shattering worlds had put enough of an onus on the idea, though, and her message was clear: *Whatever we had to do was caused by the damage your grammy and grappy created.* Edward caught it fine and decided not to jab.

Into the sudden quiet, Rowen said, “Fine. Now we all know it all — other than what the unicorns refuse to divulge and will never reveal. So what do we do? The Realm has been siphoning our stories, and we are growing thinner and less substantial. We will not allow it to continue. So what comes next?”

“We take a step,” said Fiona. “And tomorrow, another.”



CHAPTER 32

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Control came next.

Each of the three sides in the Genesis Treaty — The Realm, the unicorns, and the other worlds as represented by the Seven Nation Army — wanted something from the others, but the protection of the worlds was paramount above them all. A number of the Seven Nation Army had lived through the Grand Cataclysm, and so had all of the unicorns. The younger members of the Seven Nations, being from worlds that Mead considered to be filled with fiction, understood the power of storytelling and had as firm a recall of the Cataclysm as the older members. And The Realm, which had borrowed most of its own legends from the Dark Forest and the other worlds, felt the same. Everyone was in agreement: nobody wanted to live through another Cataclysm, and further sundering of the worlds must be avoided at all costs.

The Realm refused to surrender its magic entirely, but it did shut down two of its three pipes from the vein and allowed the unicorns to improve and leak-proof the remaining connection. They also allowed unicorns to enter the city in order to repair the vein in three places: at the sites of the two shut-down taps and at the original site below the castle, where magic had been leaking unabated.

The Realm didn't want to surrender its access to stories and inspiration either, but that was fine because the tunnels needed to be finished anyway. The tunnel system would leave access points open between the worlds to allow pressure to dissipate in controlled ways. But the Seven Nations wanted incursions by illegal couriers to stop, so all sides agreed to restrict trade to official channels, with all stories being delivered only by raconteurs.

The idea of raconteurs was new to Edward, so the Unicorn Blessing caught him up before proceeding. The raconteurs were magical beings, sometimes from other worlds and usually quasi-human, who had been imbued with unicorn magic that had allowed them to cross between worlds — as messengers — since before the Cataclysm. They were magic enough to enter the Seven Nations, were human enough to fit in inside The Realm, and had been born from unicorn magic. Thus, everyone accepted them. And

what was more, the magic the unicorns had given the raconteurs to allow them to serve as couriers made it impossible for them to lie. Raconteurs could spin yarns and stretch truths, but they could never tell outright falsities. This was done because raconteurs were keepers of stories, and their inability to lie ensured that the stories would never be distorted over time. But during negotiations, their default truth telling had the side effect of keeping everyone honest. If any of the three groups doubted either of the other two, all they would ever have to do would be to ask a raconteur if anyone was thieving, knowing the answer they'd receive would be the truth.

Control. It was all about control.

The leaks couldn't all be repaired, so the tunnel system's purpose was to *control* those leaks. Human greed couldn't be stopped entirely, so access to stories was permitted but only through *controlled* channels. The humans would never stop trying to find new ways to tap the magic, so the unicorns *controlled* their access to it and reinforced their taps to minimize loss.

Control.

The unicorns would preside over the tunnels. Humans would never move alone inside of them. Humans couldn't open the doors alone; the unicorns knew the entire system, and nobody else did; secret passageways diverted the magic and the waters that hadn't stopped draining since the great flood. The tunnels could be destroyed and collapsed if needed, and only the unicorns knew how to do it. Only the unicorns knew where all of the back doors were located, and where they led.

But because the unicorns had unfettered knowledge of the tunnels, both The Realm and the Seven Nations insisted on a check — another system of control — to counter that knowledge. The humans demanded secrets of their own. And the Seven Nations, in turn, wanted their own controls — in their case, protection for the cores of their stories, which were essentially their very souls.

There were plenty of bits of knowledge to go around, but the groups had to agree on a way to split those secrets so that together they'd have the truth — but that no one group would have access to all of it. Each party wanted a club to wield over the others' heads, to hold back as their ace in the hole. And there was a *lot* that needed to be remembered for posterity: the truth about the Cataclysm, the nature of the rips and leaks, the unicorns' shameful secret, the arrangement of the worlds. In the case of the Genesis Treaty, that meant that all of the vital knowledge had to be remembered in

three non-overlapping pieces, hidden from public eyes so the truth about the worlds' fragility would never be publicly known — until such a time as the seal needed to be cracked, and the archived knowledge revealed.

The solution was to create living vessels to hold the secrets then to conceal the identities of the vessels. Human minds were weaker than magic minds and were the most malleable, so six humans were chosen. Those six original humans, together with the raconteurs, would hold the whole of the information. Even they wouldn't know about the information they held, or the nature of the magic that sealed it within them. They would filter into the population, having children, fathering and mothering lines, eternally passing their unbroken archives to their offspring without ever knowing it was there. After a few human generations, there would be no way for anyone to lie in the face of an archivist. The truth of all that had happened would be too spread out, too unknown. Humans would take in new information, adding history to the archives within them without even realizing — then pass it on, and on, and on, and on.

Three elder unicorns would create two human lines each — one of which would be a pure archive, the other of which would be some sort of an intuitive line, meant to subconsciously interpret the knowledge rather than simply reporting it.

Each elder unicorn — the creator — would be supervised by two representatives from each species: two members of the Seven Nation Army, two humans, and two additional unicorns.

Edward and Cerberus, as unicorn witnesses, were paired with two humans, a warrior, a gargoyle, and an elder named Niles. Niles was given two human women as the group's vessels. One, named Rosetta, he turned into a mnemonic archive that he simply called a "savant."

The other was a beautiful young girl with dark hair named Sarah. Niles gave Sarah the ability to birth an empathetic breed of magic when her line's will deemed the time to be right. She would become supernaturally empathetic, able to sense worthy beings in a way that sounded like Edward's sensing of worthiness in David. It would give her an advantage in finding allies and avoiding those with ill intent, which would protect the information and magic seed she held. Niles called Sarah's line "benevolents."

To tie the three groups together at the top level, there was only one person who knew the identity of all six human lines. He was a raconteur

tasked with holding the story and telling it only when permitted by all parties. When the assembly asked the raconteur if he would keep the secret until the end of time, he promised that he would — and because raconteurs could not lie, they could all be sure that he was telling them the truth.

The raconteur arrived, and Edward gasped. It was Rumpelstiltskin.

“Don’t act so surprised, unicorn,” said the small man. “I’m a trickster, but I never lied. And you were right — a smidge of darkness has always been what this perfect world needed.” He smiled then winked. “Besides, who better than me to take the stories and make them better as I carry them? I am used to spinning gold from straw.”

The last element of inter-species control set forth in the Genesis Treaty was the most controversial, but Edward felt himself warm when he heard it. It was something Adam had proposed an unknowable amount of time before, back when he’d simply been young Edward’s Grappy, the yarn spinner, the progenitor, the hero.

It was a mentorship program, pairing unicorns with humans.

Human *riders*.

The other unicorns balked, but Edward could only smile. He alone had spent enough time with a human to see the goodness that could exist within the untidy human soul, and he alone had come and gone freely in The Realm. As he had, he’d noticed the peculiar feeling of *going home* that came with it. For David’s entire life, the boy-then-man’s soul had called out to Edward’s. Those two souls had spoken the same language. The feeling was intimate, like that between two unicorn brothers.

The notion of pairing was not reprehensible to Edward at all. Edward had mentored David and brought out what was within him. David had taught Edward empathy, and that spirit was the same beneath the surface of any two enlightened beings. They had fit like two pieces of a puzzle. And if it was possible for humans and unicorns to pair — ostensibly for the unicorn to control the human but really for each to complement the other — then why would they walk side by side? Unicorns had broad backs, and humans could not run where magic allowed unicorns to travel. The unions — which were to be protectors of The Realm — would be hampered if the two couldn’t work together, as rider and ridden.

Unicorns would choose their riders, and only permit those truly worthy to share their souls.

There would be no rush. No deadline to pair.

And the pairing — which would result in an actual exchange of spirit from one to the other — would be permanent. It was *fusion*, not just bonding. What better way was there to ensure harmony between the species than braiding them together? Humans understood the concept, having already been accustomed to intermarrying royals to create peace between nations.

Cerberus found the notion reprehensible and swore never to pair. He supported the Genesis Treaty when attention was on him but felt that the idea of pairing was insulting. Why could unicorns not simply *patrol* The Realm? But the answer was obvious: Doing that would be like an army occupying a hostile land. The secret to changing human minds (from greed to moderation, from selfishness to cooperation) was to *show* them the way, not to *enforce* it. The unicorns needed to extend themselves, to put their hooves where their hearts were. But Cerberus wouldn't listen, and complained without stopping.

Edward couldn't bring himself to pair. He used the excuse of being an ambassador and claimed that he had to stay impartial. Other unicorns believed him and found worthy humans — among those humans, William's brother Cyrus. Cyrus paired with a mare Edward had grown up with — a beautiful thing named Marie. Their pairing was the first and was so perfect and fated as to immediately change dozens of minds on both sides. Other unicorns sifted the population, all trusting their internal senses to feel what Edward had once felt — the spark of worthiness and nobility inside the fragile human shells. Rites were read, and humans climbed onto the unicorns' great white backs. And as they did, more and more unicorns realized that Cyrus was right: despite all of the lazy, greedy, do-nothing humans in The Realm, there were gems among them.

The humans and their riders became peacekeepers. They came and went from The Realm, wandering out into the lands. In the beginning, they carried the newer, better, magic-imbued slingshots popularized by Cyrus and his group. Despite the unicorns' qualms about the humans' use of magic, nobody questioned the slingshots. They were balanced. The slingshots could deal both peace and death, and did so evenly as the riders changed, as they became official, as The Realm gave them badges and powers, as they earned the nickname "marshals," before the name became true.

The marshals rode without tack — a concession to the unicorns' proud nature and a nod to the bond itself — going bareback or not at all. Slingshots became better slingshots. Better slingshots became alloy tubes called rollers, again imbued with magic, capable of firing similar balls through the ignition of magic powders. As centuries passed, rollers became firearms. Commoners began to carry firearms to protect their wares and property — just in case because some were greedy and wanted to take what others had made for themselves. The new weapons had six revolving chambers, each holding a ball with a point wedged into a casing containing a small explosive. The unicorns helped their riders create better firearms than those used by commoners. The marshals' weapons were faster. Truer. Deadlier. Seven chambers, instead of a common man's six. They fired magic bullets in plumes of dull red smoke.

But throughout the years, as Cyrus aged and found a mate who gave birth to a fine woman named Genevieve, as Genevieve gave birth to a girl who grew to have the fastest hands in The Realm, as that woman birthed a man named Malachi who lost a hand and learned to become deadly with one hand and an agile foot, the magic continued to leak. Whatever the humans had done early in the history of Mead had broken too much, and whatever Adam and Eve had caused in the Cataclysm had failed to purge it.

The once magic-rich land under Mead became poor and mundane. Their verdant world was submerged in floodwaters. Then the waters drained too far, and the lands turned dry. The Realm harvested more magic despite the problems, the magic-fat citizens never heeding unicorn protests — or, by that point, the marshals — always seeming to dare their allies to challenge them. Feeling besieged, The Realm subtly turned some of its stolen magic to weaponry and defense. It built a better and taller and more impregnable wall. The new wall kept the people in and the invaders out whenever the gates were closed, as they were more and more often. It held the magic inside. It kept The Realm whole and prosperous and green even as reports returned from the farthest reaches of the veins, reporting fallow lands.

Even as lands turned to dust and death suitable only for an increasingly heartier strain of human outlier, The Realm refused to unplug from the source. Instead, they challenged the unicorns to do what they'd promised to do generations ago — to control the leaking and seal the gaps, to keep magic, stories, and dreams in place. The Realm was the center of

civilization. It had planned well, they said. If anyone was at fault for the world's continued fracture, it was the guardians, who had built a network of tunnels to connect and intertwine the worlds. The fates of poor outlanders were not The Realm's problem. The Realm was doing well. It was prosperous and thriving.

A schism grew. The Realm had become too big to challenge. Many unicorns stayed in the city, intent on trying to guide it from within. Unpaired unicorns went with them, trying to build relations. Other unicorns left. Edward and Cerberus came and went — Edward for reasons having to do with building bridges between the peoples and Cerberus for reasons that Edward never quite understood. Cerberus saw opportunities. He used the tunnels, opened the way for other unicorns, should they need to come and go. The Genesis Treaty held; nobody returned to the Dark Forest except for the raconteurs — who told their stories, shuttled magic, and kept their secrets like babes at their breasts.

In time, The Realm's world logic became circular. The Realm existed because it existed. And in the past, The Realm had existed because it had existed. Unicorns and marshals watched their streets. Realm kings and queens always said they needed Edward, that he was their bridge. *A bridge to what?* Edward always asked. The monarchs could never answer. The peoples' pleasure and decadence grew. The raconteurs became tired. They vanished, and nobody noticed. Unicorns stopped using the tunnels, which had begun to mold themselves into something from distant human worlds, all shiny rocks and loud engines. Humans came and went in generations like seasons. The Realm turned inward. Still the unicorns stayed.

The Realm existed because it existed. The Realm had always been. Nobody inside The Realm asked why, or what the city had been founded upon. Nobody traveled. The gate stayed closed more and more, and those who wanted to wander required special permission from the castle. Not that anybody wanted to travel.

The marshals rode, the best of a depressed species. The people forgot. The unicorns let them.

Entrances to the tunnels were lost. No one cared. Nobody knew they were there. The magic continued to fail. The raconteurs stayed away, and the humans forgot they'd ever existed. Even the unicorns began to forget.

Realm storytellers told the same stories again. And again. And again. Inspiration came in the form of widening leaks from below, as worlds began

to shift and buckle, as the inevitable chasms started to widen. Inspiration came whole from other places — not just the Dark Forest and the worlds of the Seven Nation Army, but from other worlds — past, present, and future. Human worlds. Alternative worlds. Inspiration came in the form of signals that nobody understood or cared to understand. History began to unspool backward, past conforming to present. When something was spoken, it became forever true. Ideas were stolen, but there was no crime because once the idea was part of The Realm, everyone came to believe that it had always been there.

The Realm existed because it existed. Because it always had. There was never a time when The Realm was small and worlds were whole, never a time when Mead was merely a hilly path with an outcropping at its top, where once upon a time a frightened young colt waited for his apples while his grappies ended worlds.

There had never been free unicorns who opposed The Realm.

There had never been a Seven Nation Army.

There had never been times of strife, times of challenge, times of innovation.

There was and there was and there was and there was. Forever.

Edward moved in and out of The Realm. Cerberus did the same, always curious about the nature of dark magic after emerging from the abundant Realm light. The constant white made Edward nauseous. He still remembered his choice in the clearing, when he'd eschewed paradise and chosen to enter a dark tunnel of horrors. Both unicorns were tipping on the edge of their pure white centers, but in different ways.

Edward went on pilgrimages. He lost track of the outside unicorns, all of whom abandoned Mead as The Realm's magical infractions grew large enough to shear the corporeal world beneath its feet. Magic faults in the land began to appear outside the wall, and when they did, The Realm's location began to shimmer and wander, as if it were becoming less real. Each time Edward returned to The Realm from one of his trips, it took him longer and longer to find it. Worlds shifted against each other like rocks in a turbulent stream.

One day on his way back to The Realm, lost and increasingly sure he'd never see the wall again, Edward came across a small tan-and-gray creature that looked like a miniature crocodile. It opened its mouth, revealing a pink

palate and two fanged teeth. It hissed a single word at him as he approached: "Sands."

Edward stopped. Stared at the creature. It turned, and he followed. A wind stirred, and a storm surrounded him, leaving him a path. He followed the creature through the path, and when he reached a clear place, he saw the Sandman sitting in its center atop his throne of dust.

"I was right to send you through," he said. The crocodile climbed up his throne and perched on his arm. "You have lived quite a story so far, Edward the Brave."

"So far," Edward echoed. His head wanted to hang. He let it. He didn't feel like a unicorn much these days and certainly didn't feel brave. Mead was gone. The worlds had become a desert, where all a being could do was wander forever. The world he'd known was a distant memory. He didn't trust it. It had been thousands and thousands of years. He didn't even know how many, and wasn't sure it mattered. Sometimes there were mirages in the desert as he wandered alone. In them he saw the distant past where land was green. Or the distant future where there was nothing at all. He hid his wings. He didn't know why, and didn't know when he'd started. The other unicorns had all started doing the same. No one said why. Mayhap it was merely the giddy thrill of bending reality that made them do it. The world was a bag of bones, and he felt like he'd once felt in the presence of a disembodied smile that had told him it didn't know which way to go, which way led to madness. If they hid their wings and allowed time to pass, the humans would forget, and the new story of humanity would profess that unicorns did not have wings. It was as if their collective will could bend reality and make the humans the creators of stories — gatekeepers to the truth like the Sandman himself.

"Yes, Edward. *So far*. And yours has been an excellent tale. Journey. Redemption. Love. Loss! Oh, so much loss." The Sandman looked around, and the billowing storm cleared. For miles and miles and miles, there was only sand and dunes and sand and death. "And finally, amid this second plague of sand, I understand why I am here."

Edward looked around. Before he'd seen the little crocodile, he'd thought he was getting close to his destination. He'd seen Realm spires spearing the horizon, and now he saw nothing. Not that it meant he'd been close; three times now he'd seen the wall, had marched toward it, and had

found it to be yet another mirage. He longed to be done. He was tired, and wanted the story to end.

“No, no,” said the Sandman. “I hear your dreams. But your story is not over. Oh, I have had to sample it and to give parts away, for telling in other worlds. It was necessary, in these thin times. I have had to purchase the way ahead of you, to barter for your passage. To make sure that you are always crossing borders, always becoming more and more real. But do not worry. You have plenty of tales yet to live.”

Edward looked up. “You speak of my future as if it’s the past.”

The Sandman waved a dismissive hand, and a dusting fell from his suit of sand. “Past. Future. You unicorns are a magical race, yet you choose to perceive things within your world, as if it can hold you. It *isn’t* in the past, Edward. It isn’t in the future, either. It just *is*. If you choose to lay those events in order, though, I can’t blame you. A story is always best if you discover it as you go.” The Sandman reached down at his feet and grabbed a handful of sand. The crocodile ran to it and snapped greedily, so he closed his hand, enclosing the pile. “Would you like to see it the other way?”

Edward shook his head. “The other way?”

He kept his hand closed then raised it to his middle. He opened his palm, showing the pile of sand, then cupped his other hand over the top. He squeezed, and the space between his hands glowed red.

“My favorite part of the story, Edward, is where you made your choice,” said the Sandman. “A decision, this one a literal fork in the road. You were but a colt. In a strange land, surrounded by your fears. Unformed, like a lump of clay. You were on your own, without the formative pressure from your famous grappies or the criticism of your appies. It was, perhaps, the first true adversity you faced. Do you know what I’m referring to?”

“The path?”

The Sandman’s eyes widened, his hands still pressed together over the red-hot glow. “Yes! The one that led you, a creature of light, into darkness. Why did you take that path, Edward? Why did you leave what made you comfortable and enter something so horrible? I could see all of your fear as you contemplated that path; it’s written in the text of your story, and I could feel it as if it were my own. Why did you do it?”

Edward shook his head. It had been an unknowable length of time ago in his own perception, or likely two unknowable lengths of time as measured by the axial world.

“I don’t know,” he said. He didn’t want to play this game but was too tired for protest. He wanted to make it back home to The Realm, or die. “I suppose I realized I had to. That I could stay on the path of light, and go nowhere.”

The Sandman pointed a long-fingered hand directly at Edward’s nose.

“Exactly! And as a keeper of paths, I’ve seen the same thing over and over. I saw it in you the last time we met. You had to decide then, too. You said you were more than a fable. You insisted. What if you hadn’t? What if you’d chosen to stay in the Dark Forest? First, you had to decide to enter; then you had to decide to leave. And if it hadn’t gone exactly that way, you’d never have reached Mead. And how would it have been then? Well, the axial world’s story would have been different because it would’ve been a world without you.”

Edward shook his head. He was at the Sandman’s mercy. He could try walking on, but the Sandman would meet him again on the next horizon, or the one after that. Somehow, he’d reached another point of decision. Until he made that decision, he couldn’t continue — couldn’t, as the Sandman had said, get back home.

“Okay,” said Edward. “Tell me what you must. What about the ‘other way’?”

The Sandman lifted his top hand from the other and held up an irregular piece of glass. Particles of half-melted sand still clung to it. He brushed them away and held the glass in front of his eye. It was warped to the shape of the space between the Sandman’s sandwiched palms. Edward saw his eye as warped, beyond inhuman.

“You chose the dark path despite its darkness because it was the only way to move forward,” he said. “Like Grappy taught you. What drives progress? Difference. Conflict. Embracing not just delight but horrors. Remember?”

Edward shook his head. “Don’t talk to me about Adam. Or Eve. It has been a long time, and what they did cannot be undone.”

The Sandman laughed, turned the glass in his hand, and held it very close to Edward’s face. There was something in the glass. A tiny world. As he watched, the glass darkened, and his view through it — into another place — became opaque. It looked like one of the flickers in The Realm, where tired stories played out, long ago drained of their fresh allure.

“Edward, you have never chosen the easy path. Like David. Like Cyrus. Like the other noble humans you’ve known. All of you saw something you wanted, yet all of you turned from it because you knew the greater good would come from something you didn’t want to do. If you hadn’t made the decisions you’ve made, the axial world would not have Edward the Brave. But look at this ... the other way things could have happened, had you not made the choices you did.”

Despite himself, Edward felt his neck craning forward. He watched the small glass, but what he saw wasn’t precisely seen as it was sent directly into his mind, faster than his eyes could ever have processed. Image after image and impression after impression slammed into the magic inside him. He was forced to see each.

He saw a world with no unicorns at all — a world where the guardians of magic had left, and humanity had forgotten about them. The magic itself was gone. Connection to the Wellspring was lost.

He saw men killing men. Women killing women. Nations killing each other. He saw machines of death. He saw skulls and torment and felt the tearing roar of spirits as they were shredded asunder.

He saw evil. Evil in the guise of men. He saw torture. Struggles for power. He saw a man confine millions to caged farms then lead them to their deaths. He saw barbarians conquer villages. Reapers.

He saw disinterest. Disillusionment. He saw a world filled with people who were always looking but never finding because they didn’t know what they were after. He saw the soulless cry that came from enchanted detachment. Science had disproved wonder. A world of humans who crawled across a blue marble, consuming and destroying, never knowing their source. The sadness. The *sadness*. Edward couldn’t take it. It was all pain and agony and detachment and banality and emptiness and frustration and torment and violence and fury, and there was nothing more, and nothing more, and there was only trudging, progress without growth, and horrors that nobody realized were horrors, and the world was filled with shells and husks and ...

The Sandman pulled the small glass lens away, snapping it into his closed hand.

“Pleasant, isn’t it?” he said.

Edward blinked, feeling himself emerge from an odd kind of trance. His moment in the glass had lasted forever. He’d lived lives, watched empires

rise and fall. It had all seemed so meaningless. Now he was staring at the Sandman and he felt old — older than ancient, a world's tortured lifetime behind him.

“What is it?” said Edward.

“It's how the world would have been had you not made the decisions you did. In that alternate world, the unicorns would have given up trying to save humanity long ago. They would have fractured the magic so badly that it all leaked away, all at once like a plate smashing to the floor. The magic wouldn't have sifted. It would simply have gone, and the unicorns with it. Then the humans would have forgotten as they have today. Day would follow day would follow day, and they'd take over. Every scrap of land. They would build. And consume. And build. And consume. And ... well, you saw what they would have done next.”

Edward blinked again, trying to clear his mind. There was no question about what he'd just seen. It was true. He'd felt it. He'd felt the magic in his very core — or, rather, the nearly averted absence of it.

“All of that would have happened if I hadn't taken the path from the sunny clearing and into the Dark Forest?”

The Sandman laughed. “No, Edward. It would have happened if you hadn't caused the flood.”



CHAPTER 33

SANDS TO THE TRIANGULUM

“Take your time,” said the Sandman. “We have all we need.”

Edward looked up. He shook his head. He still felt the hangover of the horror world. It made his skin creep. At the same time he felt dizzy, and felt as if he might stagger and fall. He fought to stay upright, to keep focused. Eventually, that focus returned, and he saw the Sandman sitting on his throne, smiling placidly.

“My grappies caused the flood,” said Edward. He’d spent over a thousand years learning to hate them, to divorce himself from them. He didn’t want the old wound open, but here it was because what had happened before always had a way of happening again.

“No, Edward. *You* did.” He tapped his head. “I have read to the end, remember?”

“The elders sensed Adam and Eve’s magic,” said Edward. Then, because he felt the need to drive the point home, he added what he’d learned after traveling to the place himself: “*I* sensed Adam and Eve’s magic.”

“I see,” said the Sandman. “And how familiar did that magic seem?”

Edward remembered. He’d never forget. It was like being at the haven, lying on the floor as an awkward colt, a pan of marshmallow chocolate beside him. It had felt like being inside a memory, and the familiarity of the experience was terrible in its implications.

“It was as if I was with them.”

“Or with yourself.”

Edward shook his head. “Even the elders felt their magic.”

The Sandman shook his head right back. “Their *blood’s* magic, Edward. The same blood that runs through you.”

“I remember how that day unfolded! I didn’t do it! I *couldn’t* have done it! If it *could* have been me, why wasn’t I suspected by the elders?” Edward delivered the answer. “I’ll tell you why: I was too young. I could barely do magic then. Even my appies’ magic wouldn’t have been strong enough. It took tremendously powerful magic to do what they did. How could a colt have done something so huge?”

The Sandman chuckled. “You did it from the top,” he said. “From the world of the sea. You did it when the worlds were fragile, and easily broken.”

Edward realized he had an ace in the hole — a way to prove it hadn’t been him. “I never traveled to the land of sea.”

“Well,” replied the Sandman. “Not yet.”

“*Not yet?*”

The Sandman rose from his throne, drawing an annoyed chirp from the tiny crocodile. He raised a hand to his chin and thoughtfully tapped it. He started to pace, speaking as if thinking aloud.

“It’s quite a decision, Edward,” he said. “Even more so seeing as you must still make it! I can imagine the torture of such a decision. You know what the Grand Cataclysm will do, having lived through it. You know it will kill your grappies, and you know it will flood all the worlds. You know the water will create cracks that weren’t there before as it finds its way. You know its pressure will cause the worlds to shatter. But why am I bothering to tell you? You know all of this better than most. Yet you must decide to do it, even knowing all the damage you will do.”

Edward’s mind was already churning. The Cataclysm had happened thousands of years ago — and yet in another way, it hadn’t happened yet. Time *was* a loop. He *had* seen the past and the future through the mirages where cracks were thin. If the Sandman was speaking true, he could stop it — he could stop it by never doing it in the first place, never allowing his actions now to travel through the shattered places and times of this plane, into the world of his own past. He could keep worlds from crumbling, and prevent the magic from draining. He could stop the damage that had been done by The Realm and prevent the Sands from forming. He could undo his life, and make Mead whole.

“I can stop it,” Edward said.

The Sandman shook his head. “You’ve already done it.” He spread his hands, as if showing off the blank landscape.

“I haven’t. You *said* I haven’t.”

“But still,” said the Sandman, “you have.”

“I won’t. You said it’s a decision.” He felt equal measures of elation and panic flood him. “If it’s a decision, I can choose not to do it. I won’t go to land of sea. I won’t fracture the ocean floor where it spills into the worlds below. I will keep it whole.” Excitement was outweighing panic. He could

feel his fear, guilt, and the weighty millennia he carried with him begin to droop. *He could stop it.* It was his choice. *His* choice. It was Edward's decision to make, and he simply *would not make it.*

The Sandman nodded. "That's up to you, but ponder this: The flood separated you from your family. The flood caused you to wander the worlds. It caused you to speak with Noah, then the cat, then the dark creatures, then me. It caused you to grow up missing millennia of your life at once. The flood is the reason you came to The Realm when you did. It's why you met David. Why The Realm was spared from Goliath. Why David's family came to power. Why the tunnels were built, and why you fought the Seven Nation Army. It's the reason for Realm marshals. For the rediscovery of the Triangulum. And if you *don't* cause the flood, none of that will happen."

Edward surged on, suddenly exploding with bravado. "I won't do it! I won't! You say I should, but I won't! I wo — !" He stopped, realizing what the Sandman had just said. "Are you talking about the Triangulum Enchantem?"

The Sandman nodded slowly. "That comes later." He smiled. "You'll see."

"But the Triangulum Enchantem's a myth."

The Sandman gave Edward a knowing smirk. "Humans," he said, "aren't the only beings who forget things when they're given enough time."

"I don't care," said Edward. "I won't do it. You said it's my choice, and I choose not to do it. Sands to the Triangulum!"

"Then you prefer the other world?"

"Which world?"

"The one in the glass."

Edward shivered. The vision was horrible, but what he'd seen didn't matter. "I don't know that world."

The Sandman laughed. "Don't you?"

Edward saw what the Sandman was saying and shook his head. "No. You're lying. That wasn't this world. You're ly — "

"The world was broken, Edward, and sometimes the only way to set a badly healing bone is to break it again so it has a chance to repair. That's what you'll realize before you make your choice — the choice you *will* make because you've *already* made it ... and also because you are one of

the few — one of the *brave* — who understand that the easy path is usually the wrong one.”

He leaned on the throne. The tiny striped crocodile returned, nipping his sleeve.

“On the timeline you saw in the glass, after the time when the flood would have occurred, humans partitioned magic to the point of breaking just as Adam feared. It was a mere bubble at the time of the flood in both scenarios, but on the alternative timeline, darkness bubbled, boiled, and surged, then came out like *another* great flood — this one made of black oil and hatred. Joy turned to misery. The world fell into darkness. Humans abandoned their light sides, many embracing the black. The unicorns, who were pure white, never could have survived. They died off like fish flapping in a withered sea bed. *That’s* why you did it, Edward. You realized that given a choice between bad and worse, bad is better. You chose the difficult path because it was only difficult here and now. The burden fell on your shoulders, but the rest of the world benefitted even if it never knew. You took the path because it was the only way to move forward — no matter how frightened you were.”

Edward felt disoriented. He sighed, no longer certain. “I can’t get used to you discussing the future as if it’s already happened,” he finally said.

The Sandman raised his hands. “Oh, you could see it the same way, with enough practice and effort,” he said, “but I understand why your mind refuses. It’s like I said: a story’s best when you find it as you go.”



CHAPTER 34

MAKING SENSE AND SHAPES IN THE SKY

Clint sat on his porch deck, his mouth hanging open. He couldn't feel his arms at his sides or his rear on the deck boards. He felt only his mouth. He was a giant mouth, shocked to the verge of drool.

"You caused the Grand Cataclysm?"

"Yar. Because ... "

"*YOU* caused the Grand Cataclysm?"

"It was necessary in order to establish the timeline I'd lived as real. I'd become the gatekeeper, you see. I was like the Sandman, and with one quick gesture, I could decide which version of events — the one I just told you or the one I'd seen in the glass — became real and which became a work of pure, blue-sky imagination."

Clint stood. He pushed Edward hard in the chest with both hands. It was a testament to Clint's riled state that Edward actually staggered back, surprised.

"We've ridden together for nearing a century true! How the sands could you not tell me that *you* caused the Cataclysm? The world has been Realm and Sands for my entire life. I grew up taking it for granted that the worlds had split. We've wandered through fractures and along veins, always with those breaks at the forefront of everything we did, every decision we made. You've talked about the Cataclysm as I did: as an unexplained tragedy in the past without reason, or no reason that man or unicorn understood. We've been trying to keep the worlds together — to repair the damage caused by the Cataclysm. How could you exclude me? How could you not tell me all of this years ago?"

Clint expected Edward to fight back with a bunch of obtuse unicorn verbiage, but instead he just hung his great horned head.

"I was ashamed," he said.

"If you were ashamed, why did you do it?"

Edward looked up, and now his shame was tinged with anger's crimson.

"I had to."

"You *had* to? You *had* to break the worlds?" He gestured toward the void. "You had to make *this* possible?"

A bolt of something shot from Edward's horn, and the old gunslinger felt himself punched to the deck. The air was knocked from his lungs. Before he could rise, Edward was above him.

"Do you have any idea what kind of guilt I carry on my shoulders?" Edward demanded. "You lost a wife. You lost friends. I lost *worlds!* Nobody knows my secret, except you. So have some respect, gunslinger, because as much as you complain about me concealing information, you are now the only human to know the greatest unicorn truths, but also the only being anywhere, other than me and the Sandman, who knows the reason for the Grand Cataclysm. Even the savants don't know. Unicorns who remember those old days remember something equally horrible: that my grappies were traitors. Eve's name was already besmirched, but now they whisper about them both. 'Enders of worlds,' they say. And you should hear how they say it, and how they look at me, the traitors' grandcolt. I bear that guilt, too: allowing the memories of kind, generous souls to be sullied by this false accusation. I can't tell the others that they were innocent, just as the others are bound not to repeat the lie of their guilt. You said we were arrogant? I said we were blind? We are fools, too. We are a nest of untruths, stitched with false pride. We were the guardians, and we failed to guard. Our greatest act to save the world was merely the lesser of evils and killed only slightly more than it saved, including my grappies. *I did that, gunslinger. I killed them. I split the worlds. I tried to repair the damage humans had caused, knowing in advance that it would fail and that the Sands would still form. I had to walk willingly into the hoofprints of the traitors I'd spent a life believing my beloved grammy and grappy to be. I can hardly count the ways this is unfair. Which should I choose? That I lost my grappies early? That I lost my world and had to wander alone? That I lost centuries or millennia of my life when I grew up at once? That I had to hate those I'd loved then become that which I'd hated? That my heroic act couldn't save their memories and that I couldn't admit to it? That I knew the scrolls and knew that the desolation and destruction I lived back then would inevitably end in this that you see before you?"*

Edward stopped speaking above Clint. He seemed spent as if he'd expelled all of his soul's grievances at once. The unicorn would have to bear his guilt forever, but Clint couldn't help but feel good in a way, as he lay on his deck with the great white beast above him. Edward had carried

that burden alone all this time, and now, for a change, the gunslinger could carry him.

“I’m sorry,” said Clint.

Edward stepped back, shaking his head. Unicorns didn’t cry as far as Clint knew, but Edward looked as close as he could imagine. He’d seldom seen the unicorn weak, and had never before seen him so close to breaking. Clint gave him a moment then got to his rear and finally to his feet. When Edward finally seemed ready to talk, the gunslinger nodded.

“So yar,” said Edward. “I caused it. I’d seen the alternative in the glass, and it was horrifying beyond belief. Because you must understand: The Sandman is a keeper of stories, and he tells them well. I didn’t merely see images. I felt the feelings as well. It was as if I’d lived an entire life — the life of a civilization — in what had to have been seconds of time. After I left the Sandman and resumed my search for The Realm, I began to forget — not what I’d seen or felt, but the immediacy of it. The panic and certainty that what I saw and felt would have occurred had there not been a flood. As I traveled, I started to tell myself a story I’d heard. It was my hope to summon the story through magic because magic has intention. After enough time wandering — it took more and more each time I left The Realm to find it again — I finally found myself facing who I needed to see.”

“Who?” Clint asked.

“Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Why?”

“He was the only raconteur I knew. Raconteurs, like the Sandman, are keepers of secrets. But what mattered even more was that while a raconteur can spin yarns and turn one thing into something else — and while they tend to be connivers and tricksters — there is one thing they cannot do.”

“Lie.”

“Yar. So when I found him, he wasn’t surprised. He said the worlds were thin and that he’d heard me calling. It was an earlier version of Rumpelstiltskin I’d found; he’d just left me in the Grand Meadow after our first encounter. He turned when he heard me, thinking he’d found the younger me. But I told him who and when I was. He wasn’t shocked. Just nodded along. Because what I’d said unlocked the tale inside him. His face became grim. I don’t believe he knew what I was thinking of doing — something tells me that is my soul’s own story, which you now share — but

he'd heard the story I'd seen in the glass. It existed in his world — the story world — as fiction. But he verified that it could have been real had there been no Cataclysm. My blood chilled. But just to be sure, I asked him straight. I said, 'If there had been no Cataclysm, would that tale have been true?' And he said that yar, it would have been: a world in which he wouldn't have been able to tell me yar because he would have been gone along with the rest of the magic.

"So I walked the worlds, following my nose. I was somewhat unique among unicorns, being familiar with world walking. I encountered my old friend the mad cat. I encountered the wolf. I lost track of where and when I was. Then one day, without warning, I found myself in front of a great world made entirely of water, seeing that my wings were flapping above it without my remembering them starting to flap. I looked down, and despite the water's fantastic, unfathomable depth, I could see — or my magic could see — all the worlds as they had once been laid beneath it, spooled with leaks one above another as if my intention could pierce worlds where they'd already been punctured, like a needle through a stack of cloth. I didn't hesitate. I sent a word to Providence, asking for forgiveness, and did not wait for a reply. I knew what had to be done, and I did it. A great whirlpool formed, and events began to unspool one after another. I couldn't watch. I recall a gap, and waking up where I'd left, back in my proper time, now past the point of decision, with the events I've told you now solidified and permanent. When I woke, my side gritty with hot sand, I looked up and saw the horizon glowing. I walked, and the Sands became weeds. Weeds became grass. I arrived at The Realm and walked through the gate. It was like they'd been waiting for my return. It wasn't long after that that the gates were closed for good and the wall was fortified. We all felt The Realm break its tether. We could see the worlds below as if we were floating in the sky."

Clint waited for a long, long moment then looked at Edward, who was again looking down. Then he said, "Is that the end?"

Edward looked up. "Almost. I stayed in The Realm for a long time, knowing I could never return to Mead. So I stayed, keeping mostly to the growing unicorn population, and watched the marshal program mature. I kept my distance. And eventually I met my rider."

Clint met Edward's gaze. He remembered.

“Who,” Edward continued, “was a descendent of that first marshal, Cyrus. Who in turn was a descendent of David — the first civilized human to tame a unicorn.”

Clint wanted to be irritated that Edward had never told him that he was descended from David but couldn't summon the rage. Edward had taken a beating during their porch hours and had finally shared all he'd concealed. Well, almost all. Clint wanted to know what Edward knew about the Triangulum Enchantem, and still hadn't learned why the unicorns had felt the need to conceal their wings, but there would be time for those stories later.

But about the wings, Clint had a theory. Mayhap the unicorns had realized they didn't need wings once they had riders. Mayhap they'd hidden them because they knew humans would forget as they always did — and because they wanted to wield yet one more secret over humanity's head because unicorns were jerks.

So instead of asking his questions or raising his objections, Clint sat on the edge of the porch, and Edward stood nearby. They looked out into the crumbling void, knowing they couldn't stay long. The worlds were ending, and The Realm marked its epicenter. Edward had said that in the days of the apocalypse, the most fractured lands they'd traveled through when Clint was younger would be the least fractured today. Clint had little to hold him here, save his wild bunch of fighters, and Edward had only his wife, Cameron. They were only biding time, and they both knew that time had an expiration date.

“So what comes next?” Clint asked.

“I don't know.” He turned to look at Clint and then added, “For real this time.”

“You spoke of stories. Did the Sandman say yours was at its end?”

“That was a long time ago. It wasn't at its end then, but it may be now.”

“We have to go. We can't stay here.”

“Yar,” said Edward.

“But if we leave, where will we go?”

Edward looked over, but Clint didn't need the unicorn to answer and Edward knew it. In their younger years, they'd wandered forever. They both knew a great truth, and it loomed over them like a dark cloud: a gunslinger didn't need a destination in order to go where he needed to be.

Clint looked up and realized that a dark cloud was forming above in the black sky.

“You did that,” said Edward, watching it form. “Way to go, Mr. Triangulum Enchantem. Now it’s the end of the world ... and thanks to your negativity, I’m also going to get wet.”

Clint thought of sun. Of the void. Of anything other than dark clouds, because the specter of the thunderhead in the otherwise dead and featureless sky was ghastly. But the cloud didn’t dissipate. It continued to swell.

“I’m not doing it,” said Clint.

The cloud began to form a vague shape — round at one end and pointed on the other — and Clint found himself recalling days spent in The Realm during his childhood, looking up into the city’s perfect, magic-enhanced sky, trying to make sense of the shapes in the great puffs of cotton above. And as it became like a great horned head, Clint realized that as had been the case with many parts of Edward’s story, he seemed to remember hearing something like this before.

“You’re doing it,” he said.

Edward looked from the gunslinger to the shape in the clouds. Before he could stop himself, the unicorn whispered, “Grappy?”

“I’m proud of what you’ve done, Edward,” said the shape in the clouds. Beside Clint, Edward swallowed.

“And,” it added. “I’m proud of what you still must do.”

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